

Creating a Space for Self-Transformation:
Factors of Success for Adult Literacy Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties

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Abstract

A significant number of adults in adult literacy programs in Ontario have specific learning difficulties. This study sought to examine the holistic factors that contributed to these learners achieving their goals. Through a case study design, the data revealed that a combination of specific learning methods and strategies, along with particular characteristics of the instructor, participant, and class, and the evidence of self-transformation all seemed to contribute to the participant's success in the program. Instructor-directed teaching and co-operative learning were the main learning methods used in the class. General learning strategies employed were the use of core curriculum and authentic documents, and using phonics, repetition, assistive resources, and using activities that appealed to various learning styles. The instructor had a history of both professional development in the area of learning disabilities as well as experience working with learners who had specific learning difficulties. There also seemed to be a goodness of fit between the participant and the instructor. Several characteristics of the participant seemed to aid in his success: his positive self-esteem, self-advocacy skills, self-determination, self-awareness, and the fact that he enjoyed learning. The size (3-5 people) and type of class (small group) also seemed to have an impact. Finally, evidence that the participant went through a self-transformation seemed to contribute to a positive learner identity. These results have implications for practice, theory, and further research in adult education.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	Page ii
Acknowledgements	iii
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	 1
Background of the Problem	2
Problem Context	3
Purpose of the Study	4
Empirical Questions	4
Theoretical Framework: Transformation Theory	5
Importance of the Study	6
Scope and Limitations of the Study	7
Outline of the Remainder of the Document	7
 CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	 10
Theoretical Framework: Transformation Theory	10
The Adult Basic Education Context–Literacy and Basic Skills Programming	15
Definition and Characteristics of Specific Learning Difficulties	18
Program Philosophy, Instructors, and Program Structure	25
Strategies for the Classroom	28
Conclusion	36
 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES	 38
Research Methodology and Design	38
Selection of Site and Participants	39
Data Collection	40
Data Analysis	42
Credibility	43
Methodological Assumptions	43
Ethical Considerations	43
Dissemination	44
Summary	44
 CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS	 46
Findings	46
Emerging Themes	62
Summary	81

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS	85
Summary of the Study	85
Discussion	89
Implications	98
Final Word	102
References	104
Appendix A: Document Analysis Checklist: Initial Academic Assessment	111
Appendix B: Document Analysis Checklist: Training Plan	112
Appendix C: Document Analysis Checklist: Learner Portfolio	113
Appendix D: Document Analysis Checklist: 3-Month Assessment Report	114
Appendix E: Instructor Questionnaire 1	115
Appendix F: Instructor Questionnaire 2	117
Appendix G: Instructor Questionnaire 3	118
Appendix H: Participant Interview 1	120
Appendix I: Participant Interview 2	121
Appendix J: Participant Interview 3	122
Appendix K: Observation Checklist	124
Appendix L: Clearance Letter	125

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

A significant number of adults in adult literacy programming in Ontario have specific learning difficulties. A specific learning difficulty is defined by an unexpected and unexplained condition in a person "of average or above average intelligence and is characterized by a significant delay in one or more areas of learning" (Selikowitz, 1998, p. 4). Specific learning difficulties affect approximately 10% of the population (Selikowitz). The most common areas of learning affected are reading, language, attention, and motor coordination (Selikowitz).

A plethora of resources are available to describe the general characteristics of specific learning difficulties, strategies for assessment procedures, and specific learning strategies for classroom use. However, this study examined the potential for self-transformation in the presence of holistic factors—those factors that are beyond academics such as motivation, self-esteem, personal support networks, and so on—that increase the likelihood that a learner will persist in a literacy program and reach his/her independence, employment, and/or further education and training goals.

With the knowledge of success factors and potential barriers, instructors can modify current literacy instruction and program methods to meet the needs of this population, and/or advocate for specific programming.

Background of the Problem

Generally, literacy instructors (those that provide the programming for adult learners) are not required to obtain any formal accreditation in adult literacy programming before becoming instructors. The *Literacy and Basic Skills Program Guidelines* (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000) speak to accountability only in terms of agencies (i.e., business plans and performance indicators), not instructor qualifications. Instructors often have various background training in education, but not necessarily adult education. Therefore, one of the problems when trying to identify success factors for learners with specific learning difficulties is that instructors may not be prepared in various ways to identify and work with these learners. Many instructors participate in professional development activities, but these are not accredited courses or standards of practice. Therefore, instructors can benefit from an increased knowledge base of instructional practices with respect to this population.

Formal psycho-educational assessments for adults are often inaccessible. In some cases, social assistance programs may subsidize these assessments if the client is receiving income support, but only if the learner is pursuing an application to receive disability benefits. Adults that have been assessed in the past typically have not retained their assessment reports, and they are unable to describe their specific learning difficulties. Issues around assessment and identification are common hindrances to identifying and programming for adult literacy learners with specific learning difficulties.

In addition, there are very few programs that deal solely with adult learners with specific learning difficulties. In a survey of all Ontario regional literacy networks, only three reported that their region offers programming for adults with specific learning difficulties. One is located in St. Catharines, one in Toronto, and the other in Thunder Bay. This is highly unrepresentative of the need of this type of programming, given the suspected prevalence of specific learning difficulties in adult literacy programs.

The lack of professional development and formal assessment, as well as the lack of specialized programming results in learners with specific learning difficulties being misunderstood and underserved. They are not getting the attention and support that they need to achieve their independence, employment, and further education goals.

Problem Context

The field of adult basic education has received very little research attention. Typically, instructors conduct research on their own practice and create resources that are specific to adult learners. However, funding for research is becoming more and more dependent on aligning with the priorities of the funders—which usually means research needs to focus on workforce initiatives.

Also, most of the literature that exists around specific learning difficulties seems to focus on identifying characteristics. Very few studies have actually tracked this population in the adult literacy environment to explore the holistic factors that contribute to learner success. This may be due to the fact that the

typical learner participates in an adult literacy program only for up to 6 months, and many learners are quite transient, making it difficult to maintain consistent contact. Funding of programs is also flat-lined at present, which may deter studies focusing on the need for additional and specific programs and services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the specific and holistic factors that increase the likelihood that adult literacy learners with specific learning difficulties will reach their goals and possibly transform their beliefs and values about themselves as learners (Scott, 1998). From this study recommendations have been made for future practice, theory, and research.

Empirical Questions

This study sought to examine the holistic factors that contribute to success for learners with specific learning difficulties. Success in the Literacy and Basic Skills classroom consists of two factors: achieving a short-or long-term goal and increasing skills within the context of the classroom (by either achieving a Literacy and Basic Skills level—discussed later—or improving skills within a level). The following questions led the investigation.

1. What strategies were implemented to assist the learner to progress and reach his goals?
2. What characteristics of the instructor, learner, and classmates contributed to the learner reaching his goals?

3. Was evidence of self-transformation observed through the shift in the learner's values and beliefs about himself?

As described in detail in the literature review, there are three goal pathways in Literacy and Basic Skills programming: to gain independence, further education/training, and/or employment (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000).

Theoretical Framework: Transformation Theory

Mezirow (1991) sees transformative learning as the goal of all adult education. The process of transformative learning involves transforming one's frames of reference through the critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs using discourse, taking action on reflective insight, and critically assessing it (Mezirow, 1997). Transformation theory is a reconstructive theory that seeks to establish a model to explain the dynamics of the learning process (Mezirow, 1996). Scott (1998), in her relation of transformation theory, suggested that transformation is a structural change that results in a fundamental shift in someone's beliefs and values that includes social vision about the future and a struggle for freedom, equity, and authenticity. There is a shift in what is considered knowledge, and it is based on conflict theory; there must be something unsettling that inspires the transformation.

The majority of adults will usually choose not to challenge conventional thinking inside the adult classroom—therefore; it is the instructor that must place attention on alternative, minority viewpoints (Brookfield, 2002). Social

transformation occurs when individuals act to change structures in society for the purpose of emancipation. Personal transformation is a passage from one set of values to another. The purpose of personal transformation is to align all of a person's self-concepts into a cohesive self-concept. These transformations happen through intense dialogue, constant questioning, and critical thinking in order to make meaning (Scott, 1998). There is a reciprocal relationship between social and personal transformation because all people exist within a social context. Hence, both social and personal transformation can exist in all domains (Scott), including the adult basic education classroom.

Importance of the Study

Through this study holistic factors have been identified that increase the likelihood of success for an adult literacy learner with specific learning difficulties. From these findings, adult literacy instructors can begin to explore possible changes to their current programming to maximize the potential of these learners.

Future researchers may use the themes or patterns found here in a broader quantitative study to determine if these factors can be generalized to a broader population of adult learners—such as all adult literacy learners in Ontario or Canada or other adult learners such as those accessing postsecondary programs or training programs.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Although the case study participant exhibited many common characteristics of a learner with specific learning difficulties, this study focused on only one case study participant accessing a literacy class over a period of 3 months. This is a limited sample and time frame. The findings of this study are inherently linked to this educational context. Therefore, the results of this case study cannot be generalized to other contexts that have different variables (i.e., different class formats and different LBS streams—Native, Francophone, and DeafBlind). The time frame may not have afforded enough time to get a clear picture of participant progress and factors that contributed to that progress. However, an extended time frame is actually atypical, as most learners do not stay in the program for longer than 3 months.

The collection of rich descriptive data was hindered by brief responses given by the instructor due to time constraints and a seemingly uncomfortable disposition when it came to participating in the study. Her responses have to be analyzed with this variable in mind.

Also, data analysis methods heavily relied on the researcher's interpretation of the data. This results in a loss of objectivity that is necessary when utilizing case study methodology.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

Chapter Two reviews transformation theory in detail—both personal and social transformations are discussed with a focus on how these constructs

interact. The context of the adult basic education system in Ontario is then reviewed, focusing on the components of the Literacy and Basic Skills classroom. Following this is a comprehensive discussion around the definition and characteristics of specific learning difficulties. Research in the areas of program philosophy, instructor practices, and program structure are analyzed in light of the adult with specific learning difficulties, with particular attention given to issues outside of academic areas, such as self-esteem and self-determination. Finally, various strategies that are used in the classroom with this particular population are explored. This literature review builds an understanding of the factors that should be considered to maximize the success of learners with specific learning difficulties.

Chapter Three explains the methodology and procedures that were utilized in order to collect the data in the form of documents, interviews, questionnaires, and observation. A discussion around data analysis and credibility is followed by an explanation of the study's methodological assumptions, ethical considerations, and how the study will be disseminated.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study as they correspond with the beginning, middle, and end of the study period. Following this is a discussion around the emerging themes and constructs that are exhibited through the data analysis.

Chapter Five summarizes the main findings of the study. A discussion follows that presents critical reflections and questions resulting from the findings

as well as alternative interpretations of the findings. Implications for practice, theory, and further research are then identified, with a clear emphasis on furthering the research and practice base in relation to adults with specific learning difficulties.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review will outline the components of transformation theory. The adult basic education context will also be discussed in terms of Literacy and Basic Skills programming. Following this, specific learning difficulties will be defined and characteristics outlined. Finally, research around program philosophy, the instructor role, and program structure will be reviewed, followed by a discussion around strategies that can be used in the classroom to assist learners with specific learning difficulties.

Theoretical Framework: Transformation Theory

Transformation theory is a learning theory that specifically addresses adult education and more specifically adult educators because they are historically placed to help learners develop autonomy and seek equality, social justice, and democracy (Mezirow, 1999). Transformation theory suggests that transformation is a structural change that results in a fundamental shift in someone's beliefs and values (Scott, 1998). This includes one's social vision about the future and a struggle for freedom, equity, and authenticity. There is a shift in what is considered knowledge. Mezirow contends one should avoid closure of certainty and seek new experience with multiple meanings. Mezirow goes on to say that learners need to pursue "mindful learning" (p. 2) in the continuous creation of new categories and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective.

There are three types of knowledge: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory (Cranton, 2002). Instrumental knowledge is the objective knowledge gained from scientific inquiry. Communicative knowledge is the understanding of self, others, and the social norms in the society. Emancipatory knowledge is the self-awareness that frees people from constraints and is seen as the product of critical reflection—that being the process of assessing the validity to beliefs and assumptions in light of new experiences or knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge is transformative (Cranton).

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a particular frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrated with experience. There are two dimensions of frame of reference: habits of mind and point of view. Habits of mind are broad, habitual ways of thinking and feeling. They are influenced by assumptions that make up a set of codes (Mezirow). A point of view is the feelings, beliefs, and judgements regarding a specific person, group, or concept. Habits of mind are more consistent where points of view are usually more receptive to feedback from others (Mezirow).

Transformation theory is based on conflict theory; there must be something unsettling that inspires the transformation (Scott, 1998). Cranton (2002) describes it as a traumatic event or trigger that makes an individual aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this experience and is open to alternative ways of thinking, he may change the way

he sees the world, thereby transforming a part of how he makes meaning in the world (Cranton).

Social transformation exists when a social structure (i.e., social organizations, institutions, and cultural products) is used with a theory of action where individuals have the capacity to act to change structures in society. This theory has a critical orientation in relation to education. People use critical social theory to advocate for freedom of expression, individual and collective rights, and diversity of opinion (Scott, 1998). Knowledge is seen as shared meanings among people. Within this approach, the values of adult educators revolve around what will most contribute to just social conditions and equitable relationships that further "democracy, authenticity and freedom among the majority of the people" (Scott, p. 180). Hence, knowledge is emancipatory. Social transformation is learned through informal learning (Scott). There has to be active social engagement where learners and teachers work together.

Personal transformations are connected to social ones in that a person's self-concept is formed through an intrinsically social process (Scott, 1998). If adults see situations in their lives as concrete manifestations of broader political contradictions, they will see that changing their lives is impossible without political or societal change (Brookfield, 2002).

In adult education programs, there is a collective social nature where classes learn, act, and grow together. Personal transformation is a passage from one set of values to another (Scott, 1998); from an unexamined self to a critically

examined belief (Mezirow, 1999). The criterion for social transformation also works in this context. Structural change occurs in the psyche of an individual for personal transformative learning. At any one time an individual has multiple self-concepts, and each one may have different interests and respond differently to situations. All of these “selves” contribute to a “decentred self” (Scott, p. 183). The aim of personal transformation is to align all of the 'selves' of an individual to gain coherence, peace, and a sense of wholeness (Scott).

In adult education, individuals can transform their “selves” or their perspectives in a safe environment when they reflect through dialogue on the fundamental premises that guide their lives (Scott, 1998). Group members then challenge these premises. The safe group is crucial to personal transformation because people need help uncovering the meaning schemes that they have held in their unconscious. Conflict is usually required to challenge these unconscious habits and assumptions (Scott).

Transformative education is the expansion of consciousness. The aim in transformation for individuals is to attain self-knowledge, which leads to the congruence between the inner and the outer parts of people's lives. What emerges is a more authentic person (Scott, 1998).

Both perspective transformation and transformative education are highly reflective (Scott, 1998). Perspective transformation relies on social dialogue or the intersubjective. Transformative education relies on intrapsychic dialogue between the two parts of the psyche—the unconscious and the ego. In adult

education, the instructor must relentlessly question what is going on, what it means, and what difference it makes to the learner (Scott).

There are no specific teaching methods that guarantee transformative learning (Cranton, 2002). However, the role of the instructor is to facilitate continual critical inquiry wherever it leads the learner (Mezirow, 1999), not to be just an authority on subject matter (Mezirow, 1997). This requires critical thinking where meaning unfolds over time (Scott, 1998). To encourage critical self-reflection, instructors need to provide opportunities for learners to question their assumptions (Cranton). Instructors should be encouraging and facilitating intersubjective and intrapsychic reflection (Scott) through discourse (Mezirow, 1997). Discourse is a dialogue that assesses the reasons in support of competing interpretations by critically analyzing the evidence and arguments (Mezirow, 1997). Discourse is a conscientious effort to find agreement by building new understandings and, in so doing, fostering interpersonal relationships (Mezirow, 1996).

Social transformation and personal transformation overlap in significant ways. When there is social upheaval, the person is affected. When the individual's self changes structurally (i.e., self-concept), there are implications for changes in society because individual change happens in a social context (Scott, 1998). Change has the capacity to affect society. Hence, there is a reciprocal relationship that can be analyzed in any social condition, such as the adult basic education classroom. The goal of adult education is to assist learners to become

more autonomous thinkers by learning to negotiate their values and meanings rather than to uncritically act on those of others (Mezirow, 1997). Under ideal conditions for learning, learners would have accurate and complete information, be free from coercion, be able to assess arguments objectively, be open to alternative perspectives, have equal opportunity to participate, and be able to accept a rational consensus (Mezirow, 1996).

Transformation theory was applied when analyzing the case study data in order to determine if the participant was able to break free from past perceptions about himself and form a unified self that was able to meet new challenges and reach his goals.

The Adult Basic Education Context–Literacy and Basic Skills Programming

The Literacy and Basic Skills classroom is the context for this case study research. Through the Literacy and Basic Skills Program, the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) funds Ontario agencies to provide literacy services to adults who are typically 19 years of age or older, are proficient in English speaking skills, have been out of school for at least 1 year, and are able to progress. These individuals are able to set short-term goals and reach them using the program (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000).

LBS programs focus on adults who are unemployed and do not have the literacy skills necessary to find and keep employment or to meet their everyday needs. There is an emphasis on aiding people who are receiving social assistance.

The program is also open to employed Ontarians who need to improve their literacy skills in order to maintain or upgrade their work skills (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). Learners who enter a Literacy and Basic Skills Program have the opportunity to upgrade their reading, writing, numeracy, speaking and listening, self-management and self-direction skills, and, in some cases, computer skills (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities).

There are three goal paths in the Literacy and Basic Skills Program: independence (learners who would like to improve their skills in order to complete daily literacy tasks at home and in the community), further education and training (for those learners that need to upgrade their skills for grade 12 completion or equivalent or those looking into further training or postsecondary programs), and employment (those learners who have a specific employment goal and need to upgrade specific literacy skills to meet the demands of that job; Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000).

When learners first enter the program they are assessed to identify their Literacy and Basic Skills levels in reading, writing, and numeracy and which skills need to be upgraded to reach their goal. Literacy and Basic Skills levels range from 1-5 (Level 1 is approximately grade 1; Level 2 is approximately grade 2-3; Level 3 is approximately grade 4-5; Level 4 is approximately grade 6-7; and Level 5 is approximately grade 8-9 in the current Ontario curriculum). This is a standard way of evaluating adult skill levels at or below the high school level

(Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). Each LBS level encompasses a wide variety of skills. Therefore it is typical for learners to gain many skills without moving to the next level.

Ongoing assessments ascribe to the learning outcomes approach whereby each learner's training plan lists only those skills needed to reach his/her specific goal (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). This approach is in opposition to a curriculum-based approach where a learner would be required to complete all the skills in a certain level. Ongoing assessment focuses on demonstrations of practical learning related to the learner's goal (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities). For example, if a learner's goal is to gain employment in the construction sector, demonstrations of learning would focus on activities related to construction such as performing measurement calculations to build a frame for a house.

Literacy and Basic Skills classes are learner-centred. Learners work toward their specific goals utilizing their personal learning preferences (as much as possible). Classes are also flexible to accommodate different schedules. Classes are ongoing and there is continual intake, so learners are able to access the classes at any time (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). Typically there are approximately 10-15 learners in a classroom, but some agencies also offer small group classes (3-8 learners). One-to-one tutoring services are used for learners who have fundamental reading and writing difficulties—such as those individuals who are functioning at LBS levels 1-2.

A primary concern in Literacy and Basic Skills programming is the high prevalence of specific learning difficulties among LBS learners. Instructors are in need of more professional development to understand the nature of specific learning difficulties and how to serve these learners. As mentioned above, formal psycho-educational assessments for adults are often inaccessible due to lack of financial resources and subsidy. Therefore, instructors have the responsibility of identifying specific learning difficulties and developing strategies to assist their learners.

Definition and Characteristics of Specific Learning Difficulties

As mentioned in the introduction, specific learning difficulties can be described as an unexpected and unexplained condition of people with “average or above average intelligence, characterized by a significant delay in one or more areas of learning (Selikowitz, 1998, p. 4). Specific learning difficulties can be observed in academic skills such as reading, writing, spelling, and math. However, difficulties can also be seen in such areas as persistence, organization, and gross/fine motor control (Selikowitz). People with specific learning difficulties could have significant delays in one or many of these areas. A person with specific learning difficulties is as able as other people, except in usually one or two areas of learning (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004). Delays can be described on a continuum from moderate learning difficulties to severe learning difficulties (Wright, 2006).

The cause of specific learning difficulties is of yet unknown, but likely multifactorial (Selikowitz, 1998). There is evidence for genetic factors playing a role as people with specific learning difficulties are more likely to have a close relative with a similar difficulty. Males with specific learning difficulties outnumber females three to one (Selikowitz). Environmental causes continues to be debated. Some studies have found that multiple problems in pregnancy, labour, delivery, and the early newborn period are more likely to be associated with specific learning difficulties, where others have found that problems are more likely to lead to specific learning difficulties if they are coupled with socioeconomic deprivation (Selikowitz).

In a study of just under 3,000 adults with specific learning difficulties in England in 2003-2004, Emerson, Malam, Davies, and Spencer (2005) found that 69% of those studied were living in private households (either alone, with a partner, or with their parents or other relatives) as opposed to supported accommodation. Those living in private households were much more likely to live in disadvantaged communities (Emerson et al.). Nine percent of participants reported that they had been the victim of a crime and, of those, 34% reported that they had been victimized more than once (Emerson et al.).

Many learners with specific learning difficulties feel disengaged and alienated from secondary school and feel that the traditional programs fail to meet their needs (Hutchinson, Freeman, Stoch, & Chan, 2004). Therefore,

adolescents with specific learning difficulties have a higher dropout rate than the general population (Hutchinson et al.).

Emerson et al. (2005) reported that only 23% of the participants in their study who reported having specific learning difficulties indicated that they had a job. These jobs were typically manual labour or entry-level positions such as gardening, warehousing, or waitressing. Sixty-five percent reported that they would like a job but found that no one would hire them because of their specific learning difficulties. Similarly, Hutchinson et al. (2004) and Riddell, Baron, and Wilson (2001) reported that upon leaving school, young adults with specific learning difficulties are more likely to be employed in low to moderate paying occupations, are more likely to work part-time, and are less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education. There is also little training specifically geared for adults with specific learning difficulties outside of the mainstream classroom (Riddell et al., 2001). Since people with specific learning difficulties are regarded as expensive to train and unlikely to meet goal requirements, they are regarded as unattractive learners (Riddell & Wilson, 1999).

People with specific learning difficulties are much more likely to be poorer than the general population. Emerson et al. (2005) found, in their England-based study, that 23% of the participants with specific learning difficulties were poor and 48% reported that they did not have enough money.

Academic Characteristics

There are many different ways to categorize specific learning difficulties. Literacy and Basic Skills classes in Ontario look at three main areas: visual, auditory, and organizational processing difficulties. There are also other personal and social characteristics associated with specific learning difficulties. These factors can compound the effects of the difficulties. Such factors include attention difficulties, personal characteristics such as low self-esteem, and/or social anxiety (Fowler, 2003).

Visual processing difficulties hinder a learner's ability to make sense of information taken in through the eyes (that are beyond visual disorders such as myopia, astigmatism, etc.). Difficulties can be seen in the learner's ability to discriminate between different letters and words, follow text while reading, and when the learner has difficulty remembering the "look" of letters and words (visual memory). In some cases, letters and words seem to move on the page. Visual processing difficulties can affect a learner's reading, writing, and mathematical abilities (Fowler, 2003).

Auditory processing difficulties affect how aural information is interpreted or processed by the brain. This can interfere with speech and language acquisition and can affect all areas of learning, especially reading and spelling. An auditory processing difficulty is not a hearing problem but rather a difficulty in perceiving aural information. A learner may be unable to recognize or isolate individual parts of speech or remember spoken language. The learner

may have difficulty with auditory sequencing and blending or encoding phonetically (Fowler, 2003).

Organizational processing difficulties exist when an individual has difficulty managing time and space and organizing his/her day-to-day activities. The learner may show difficulties when receiving, integrating, remembering, and expressing information. As well, he/she may have gross and/or fine motor difficulties (Fowler, 2003).

Other academic characteristics of specific learning difficulties include difficulty:

- Becoming fluent or automatic in a new skill;
- Completing tasks as quickly as other learners;
- Remembering (specifically short-term memory which affects understanding instructions or remembering what has been read);
- Retrieving words when speaking;
- Pronouncing words properly due to difficulties discriminating sounds;
- Using directions correctly;
- Comprehending reading (despite being able to decode words);
- Attending or concentrating on a specific task;
- Dealing with stress (specifically due to deadlines or time limits) (The University of Warwick, 2004).

In addition, the vocabulary of adults with specific learning difficulties usually contains more “core or sight” words and less “fringe or complex” words than those without specific learning difficulties (Graves, 2000).

Specific learning difficulties can make lessons hard to understand.

Learners may have a hard time keeping up with classmates and often times see themselves as stupid. They find it difficult to concentrate on lessons because they cannot understand them properly (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004).

There is also a noticeable inconsistency with the demonstration of skills on “good days” and “bad days” (The University of Warwick, 2004). Specific learning difficulties can also create a lot of anger and frustration which leads to learners leaving programs if they do not receive the support they need (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004).

Social and Emotional Characteristics

Having specific learning difficulties can undermine self-confidence. This can also affect relationships, specifically making and keeping friends (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004). Friendships play an important in emotional, mental, and physical health and help to maintain well-being. Friends are central to a sense of identity and social inclusion. Yet, research has consistently shown that those with specific learning difficulties are lonely and lack friends (Heslop, 2005). In the study of adults with specific learning difficulties in England, 31% of participants reported that they did not have any contact with friends and 5% said they did not see anyone in their family in the last year (Emerson et al., 2005).

Men seem to be the most disadvantaged since women are more likely to be in reciprocal social relationships than men (Riddell et al., 2001).

In the Emerson et al. (2005) study it was noted that a lot of people with specific learning difficulties feel worried, left out, and helpless. One in five participants said they were “sometimes unhappy.” It is even agreed upon that there is widespread incidence of self-harming behaviour amongst people with specific learning difficulties (Jones, Davies, & Jenkins, 2004).

Resilience

Adults with specific learning difficulties have the advantage over when they were children, that they have the right to choose their life circumstances. This could involve selecting those activities that are easier and reliant on learning strengths instead of weaknesses (Selikowitz, 1998). That being said, it is important for adults with specific learning difficulties to accept these challenges in order to find ways to cope with them (Selikowitz).

Academic resilience can be realized with the existence of intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support (Hutchinson et al., 2004). Intrapersonal characteristics include social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose, and the setting of long-range personal goals. Interpersonal support is noted as at least one caring and compassionate person who takes a social interest in the learner and makes an extra effort to assist him/her. It includes positive relationships with instructors and peers, as well as strong encouragement from parents. Finally, institutional support

includes the delivery of interesting curriculum, alternative programming, and extracurricular activities. All of these concepts are interrelated and provide a foundation for the others to grow (Hutchinson et al., 2004). Adults with specific learning difficulties can continue to improve their skills throughout their life, as Literacy and Basic Skills programs can attest.

Program Philosophy, Instructors, and Program Structure

When working with all adults, but specifically those with learning specific difficulties, it is important to remember the adult learning principles outlined by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (1997):

- Adults should be full participants in the learning process;
- Educators learn with, and from, the learners;
- Adults learn when they perceive a need to learn;
- What is learned, in most cases, should have practical value;
- Adults participate in setting their learning goals;
- Learning is built upon what adults already know;
- Initial assessments and evaluation of progress should involve the learners and be based on clearly-defined goals;
- Learning is a lifelong process;
- Adults want recognition for learning. (p. 14)

Instructors need to acknowledge the emotional sensitivity of individuals with specific learning difficulties. Previous frustrations in learning typically create feelings of inadequacy (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991).

Adults with low literacy skills who have always wanted to read and write effectively will likely be very sensitive about their inabilities. It is important to note here that these emotional disturbances are not primary but secondary and have resulted from years of accumulated frustration. These learners may exhibit behaviours and/or attitudes that are inappropriate (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada; e.g., outbursts in class). Therefore, it is very important for instructors to establish a positive and trusting relationship with the learner. Instructors should be compassionate, emotionally supportive (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada) and provide holistic programming (Wright, 2006).

Although a program philosophy of acceptance, understanding, and respect is valued, many adult literacy instructors have only basic knowledge of specific learning difficulties and may find it difficult to meet the educational needs of these adults (Corley & Taymans, 2001). Adult educators are not always prepared to address the very unique needs of this population (Academy for Educational Development, 1995a). Skinner and Gillespie (2000) contend that many adult learners with specific learning difficulties do not receive enough direct help from the instructor. Therefore, it is crucial for instructors to be proactive in their own learning and seek out professional development opportunities to foster optimal learning experiences for learners (Johnson & Hegarty, 2003).

A highly structured core curriculum and individualized instructional strategies are recommended for learners with specific learning difficulties (Academy for Educational Development, 1995c; Skinner & Gillespie, 2000; Stuart-Smith, 2003). Learners require a framework of long-term goals that explicitly upgrade students' basic skills. This should be a systematic, sequential curriculum that focuses on the methodological building of skills rather than a global, random instructional approach (Skinner & Gillespie). Adult learners tend to like using a textbook or workbook because it gives them a sense of direction and keeps them focused and organized—this holds true for learners with specific learning difficulties as well (Skinner & Gillespie).

Beyond the curriculum, there are other functional skills of a literacy program that are critical for these learners. These include self-help, time management, employment adjustment, stability skills (Young et al., 1996) and social skills (Academy for Educational Development, 1995b; Fernandez, Kovari, Vultnerini, & Williams, 2002). The existence of specific learning difficulties has much broader implications than just academics, so literacy providers should be prepared to help teach functional skills that may not have a direct literacy component (Young et al.).

In order to serve this population it is critical that appropriate assessment procedures be put in place (Young et al., 1996). Criterion-referenced tests can be an invaluable tool for providing instructors with feedback on learner progress (Skinner & Gillespie, 2000). However, informal assessment measures such as in-

class reviews and student portfolios are also useful for evaluating progress (Skinner & Gillespie). Adult literacy instructors conduct informal assessments when they talk with learners (Crux, 1991). An interview can be very effective in getting information regarding family and educational history, occupational background, aspirations, current learning problems (Crux), certain behaviours or personality traits, and preferred learning modalities (Academy for Educational Development, 1995c). Interview and assessment activities can address issues of attention, reasoning, processing, memory, oral communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculations, co-ordination, social competence, and emotional maturity (Academy for Educational Development).

Strategies for the Classroom

Having specific learning difficulties does not mean that a person is unable to learn but that he/she has difficulty learning through conventional teaching methods. Teaching methods need to be direct, explicit, and systematic (Skinner & Gillespie, 2000). In a study involving adult learners with specific learning difficulties and their tutors, the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Centre (2000) found that progress was made when the tutors and learners had a good personal and working relationship and there was evidence of collaborative planning. They also found that progress was made when both the learners and the tutors were able to articulate the learners' specific difficulties. They also found that it was important that both the learner and tutor understand that teaching and learning

take time. Most of the tutors understood that creativity was required, and a variety of strategies, tools, and materials were needed.

Self-Determination

As mentioned above, teaching and learning outside of specific academic areas are important for this population of learners. A key component that should be addressed in the class is self-determination. Self-determined individuals have positive attitudes about themselves. They are goal-directed, and they believe that they can succeed (Corley & Taymans, 2001). Because many learners with specific learning difficulties have had many negative past educational experiences and have low self-esteem, promoting their self-determination will help these learners develop a range of competencies that are valued by society and that can be used to offset their specific challenges (Corley & Taymans).

Corley and Taymans (2001) suggest that self-determination can be taught in five steps (learning the self, goal setting, taking action, experiencing outcomes, and finding supportive environments). The first step is to know the self and value the self. This means that learners have knowledge about their specific learning difficulties and its effect on daily life. It is important that the learner define the specific difficulties as things that are limited rather than all encompassing so the learner can accept them in a positive light. Literacy instructors should encourage positive self-talk and help the learner use this when frustrations arise. They should also help learners identify their particular strengths and identify the kinds of supports that they need.

Step Two involves planning or goal setting. Learners should be encouraged to make choices that match their interests, preferences, and strengths and to avoid areas of weakness. Realistic goals should be the focus (Bates, 1997). More successful learners use a step-by-step process to achieve goals—one small or short-term goal at a time (Corley & Taymans, 2001). Achieving short-term goals sets the stage for additional goal setting and goal-directed behaviour.

The third step concerns the actions that learners take. Learners need to be encouraged to be proactive and engage in actions to fit situations to their strengths. They should be encouraged to think that they can complete all tasks, even if they do not actually complete them the way others would. Learners need to be creative to find ways to accomplish tasks and to persist despite challenges.

Step Four is about experiencing outcomes and learning from them. Individuals with specific learning difficulties often have an external locus of control, which can decrease the individual's motivation to solve problems and persevere through challenging situations. Learners who understand their strengths and challenges are able to evaluate their successes and failures in terms of acknowledged areas of ability or disability. Hence, the learner is able to conduct self-assessments and act on the evaluations.

The final step is to find supportive learning environments. Learners need to be in situations where they can continue to grow and to develop their abilities. This also involves using accommodations and supports in order to succeed. In order to foster self-determination in learners, instructors need to use direct

teaching with opportunities for generalization, mentoring and modeling, and involve learners in planning (Corley & Taymans, 2001).

Social Skills

Instructors must also acknowledge the importance of social skills and teach these skills explicitly (Corley & Taymans, 2001). The learner needs information about his/her difficulties and how those difficulties affect his/her ability to get along with others (Washington, 1995). Learners should practice negotiation and feedback skills. Other topics should include self-monitoring, self-control, negotiating difficult situations, choosing alternatives to conflict, and participating in groups (Corley & Taymans). Understanding and forming relationships should also be discussed, as relationships are often the key in successful community inclusion (Bates, 1997). It is important that learners experience how to approach social interactions appropriately. When these skills are being established, specific positive reinforcement is crucial. It is important that instructors talk to their learners about their behaviour and model appropriate actions and responses. Co-operative group work in the class may be helpful for this type of work (Washington).

Self-Advocacy and Self-Esteem

Strong self-determination and positive social skills both require a certain degree of self-advocacy. Instructional tasks should offer students the opportunity to plan for themselves and to make choices and decisions (Sutcliffe, 1990). Instructors can empower learners to take control of their own learning by

adopting a learner-centred approach. Instructors should also recognize and acknowledge the past experiences of learners; this enhances learners' evaluation of their self-identity in the learning context which can positively impact their self-esteem. The development of positive self-esteem is enhanced by speaking up for oneself and others, communicating effectively, being assertive (and understanding the difference between being assertive and being aggressive), expressing personal views, understanding citizen rights, making personal choices and decisions, and planning for change (Sutcliffe). Activities that focus on these skills can help learners express their needs. They may also assist learners to see themselves as efficient communicators, which can add to their self-concept and may contribute to a positive self-esteem.

Possession of the above-mentioned skills requires the learner to have a high self-esteem. However, many individuals with specific learning difficulties suffer from low self-esteem due to past negative experiences (for example, failing consistently or being labelled as unable to learn). It is important, therefore, that instructors address these issues in the classroom. Some of the ways instructors can build self-esteem is by establishing a flexible and relaxed learning environment, reducing the emphasis on competition and perfection, emphasizing learners' accomplishments, providing immediate feedback, selecting materials that are level-appropriate, providing opportunities for learners to use their strengths, breaking assignments into small segments to allow for a more immediate sense of accomplishment, and communicating to

learners that they will be successful at each task (Academy for Educational Development, 1995b).

Direct Instruction

There are hundreds of specific learning strategies and accommodations that can help individuals with specific learning difficulties increase their strengths and cope with their challenges. Examples of these strategies and accommodations would be using a whole word approach for those with auditory processing difficulties, using a coloured transparency over a white worksheet for those with visual processing difficulties, or using various assistive technologies (such as speech synthesizers and word prediction programs) to compensate for reading and writing difficulties (Riviere, 1996).

These strategies need to be taught using the direct instruction method (Skinner & Gillespie, 2000). Using this method involves six steps. The first is explanation where the instructor outlines in detail what the strategy or accommodation is, what it is intended to accomplish, and the most effective ways to use it (Crux, 1991). Step Two is modelling, whereby the instructor demonstrates how the strategy is to be used. The third step is self-instruction where the instructor asks the learner to explain the strategy in his/her own words. This provides the learner with an opportunity to rehearse what has been learned and shows the instructor that the learner understands the strategy. Step Four involves practice through multiple activities to reinforce the strategy. Next is feedback, where the instructor and learner discuss how well the strategy is

working and whether review is needed. And finally, implementation happens when the learner is able to generalize the strategy or transfer skills to other situations such as at home or at work (Crux). Using this method will allow for the necessary structure and repetition typically needed by adult learners with specific learning difficulties to put appropriate strategies and accommodations in place to assist their learning.

Instructional Methods

Other effective teaching methods include co-operative learning, using multisensory/multimodal learning, discovery learning, and using authentic documents. Co-operative learning involves full participation by all group members, where learners help one another and share ideas (Kaufman & Burden, 2004). In this environment, cross-tutoring usually occurs spontaneously. The ideal co-operative learning group consists of between three and six learners. This model is a great way to maximize the complexities of open-entry/open-exit policies, as instructors can introduce new learners into a group so that each learner gets acquainted with the other learners quickly (Skinner & Gillespie, 2001).

Multisensory learning—that which uses several pathways or learning styles—is very effective for learners with specific learning difficulties (Skinner & Gillespie, 2001). This method allows for the brain to receive multiple messages so that if one sensory pathway is weak, the others can reinforce it. Multimotor learning involves movement that further reinforces learning as the muscles

involved in speech and writing move in synchrony with sensory input (Skinner & Gillespie). Both multisensory and multimotor learning allow learners to better perceive, process, and retain information to communicate more successfully (Skinner & Gillespie).

Discovery learning involves discussion, inquiry, and response between the learner and the instructor. In this method, learners are asked to take an active role in the learning process. Learners are led to discover concepts or ideas by specific questioning procedures. Discovery learning increases conceptual thinking and analysis at all levels (Skinner & Gillespie, 2001).

Finally, in addition to traditional instructional materials, it is important for learners with specific learning difficulties to use authentic documents when working toward a goal (Wright, 2006). Many of these learners have difficulty generalizing the skills they learn in structured programming with skills they will have to use at home, at work, or in the community (Academy for Educational Development, 1995c). Examples of the use of authentic documents could include: having learners fill out an actual job application form, perform measurement calculations based on actual catalogues of products, or write a complaint to a company by using an actual complaint or report template. Learners with specific learning difficulties are more motivated to read authentic materials such as workplace forms because they can see the clear link with their goals (Academy for Educational Development).

Although it is important to remember that instructors cannot provide for all of the needs of all of the learners, it is critical that instructors use divergent thinking to see all of the skills that individuals with specific learning difficulties need. It is only when instructors and programs consider the whole person that learners will be working towards transformation, not only of their skills but also of themselves.

Conclusion

A significant number of adult learners in literacy programs have specific learning difficulties. Specific learning difficulties can affect one or more academic areas such as reading, writing, spelling, and math, as well as such areas as persistence and organization. These difficulties hinder the achievement of their goals in adult literacy programming. Many adults with specific learning difficulties have low self-esteem and decreased self-confidence due to past negative educational experiences. Many of these learners are socially isolated with few friends and family ties.

Instructors and program planners should be conscious of the complex difficulties these learners face. For a program to be successful or create the opportunity for learners to reach their goals, instruction must allow for personal transformation or a space for learners to see themselves in a more positive light so that they can engage in future goal setting and make decisions that correlate with their potential.

Programs need to have the tools to assess adults with specific learning difficulties in order to serve them appropriately and specifically. Programs also need to embrace adult learning principles by including learners in planning, teaching practical skills, encouraging learners to set practical goals, and building on what learners already know. As well, instructors should foster a relationship of mutual respect and trust and be very proactive in terms of getting the appropriate training they need to service these learners. For adults with specific learning difficulties, a highly structured core curriculum in combination with using authentic documents is most effective. Overall, the focus should be on holistic programming, which could include instruction around self-determination, social skills, self-advocacy, and self-esteem. Specific strategies that are useful in the classroom are direct instruction of learning strategies and accommodations, cooperative learning, multisensory/multimotor learning, and discovery learning.

With this knowledge, program planners and instructors are equipped to serve adults with specific learning difficulties, which will enable these learners to pursue and achieve their personal, educational, and employment goals and see themselves as capable of achieving those goals.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

A case study approach was used to gain valuable, rich information about a learner with specific learning difficulties in the Literacy and Basic Skills classroom. The case was analyzed over a period of 4 months (June-September 2007), and triangulation was used to collect data. Analysis focused on identifying themes and constructs to better inform literacy practitioners of the needs of this population.

Research Methodology and Design

This study utilized the qualitative case study design to provide a detailed picture of the setting. Described in detail were the participant's experiences and classroom issues related to learning with specific learning difficulties. Data collection methods included interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document analyses. The interpretivist view was utilized in that social reality is a set of meanings that are constructed by the individuals who participate in that reality (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). An in-depth, field-based study was conducted of one class and their instructor, which contained a learner with specific learning difficulties over 4 months. The participant was studied in his natural context—the Literacy and Basic Skills small-group classroom. The classmates and instructor provided the social context of the classroom experience. The instructor also provided the specific learning methods and strategies utilized with the learners.

The purpose or focus of this case study was to describe the particular factors of success for learners with specific learning difficulties. From this

description themes and constructs were identified in order to support literacy practitioners.

Selection of Site and Participants

The case was presented from a purposeful sampling model (Gall et al., 2005). Assessment clients that had been identified as having specific learning difficulties the Learning Challenges Assessment Tool for Adult Literacy Learners (Maggio, 2005) through the local literacy network were considered in the sample. The participant was selected based on the following criteria: what type of programming he was receiving (only those referred to a class or small group were considered in order to collect data on the classroom dynamic; the one-to-one model was not considered), his willingness to participate in the project, and his estimation of how long he intended to be in the class (the participant needed to be in a position to commit to the program for at least 3 months for observation).

The network was asked to compile a list of those assessment clients that have been identified as having specific learning difficulties. The principal investigator conducted a phone interview to screen potential participants with the above-mentioned criteria. The principal investigator then contacted the instructor of the selected participant and invited her to participate. A letter of invitation was given to the selected participant, the instructor, and the classmates in person. Following this, the consent form was reviewed in detail with all participants, and they were asked to sign it.

Data Collection

Triangulation of the data was obtained through the use of several data collection instruments. Existing learner documents, instructor questionnaires, participant interviews, and observations of the learner in his instructional environment were analyzed.

Document Analysis

Four documents were analyzed: the initial academic assessment, the training plan, the learner's portfolio, and the 3-month assessment. Once the case study participant consented to the study, a request for a copy of the learner's initial academic assessment from the literacy network was made by the principal investigator. The assessment outlined current skill levels as well as pertinent background information that was helpful to determine how much progress the learner made throughout the study period. The training plan was a document created by the instructor and learner after entering the class. It outlined the specific goals of the participant and the skills that needed to be upgraded. A copy of this document was requested during the second observation period. Throughout the 4 months, the principal investigator also requested to see the learner's portfolio, which included all the work he did in the class. Specific attention was paid to any writing samples that spoke to the learner's experiences in the class. The instructor was asked to do a 3-month assessment at the end of the study period in order to track progress. Document analysis checklists can be found in Appendixes A, B, C, and D respectively.

Questionnaires

The purpose of the instructor questionnaires was to identify instructional approaches used with the participant and the instructor's personal experiences working with this population as well as her report on the participant's progress throughout the study period. The instructor questionnaires can be found in Appendixes E, F, and G respectively.

Interviews

Three interviews took place in the study period and were transcribed for analysis. Interviews with the participant took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the study period. The purpose of the participant interviews was to examine his self-perceptions of his specific learning difficulties, his goals for the program, and his perceptions of the factors that influenced his success. The participant interview questions can be found in Appendices H, I, and J respectively.

Observation

The participant was observed in his class three times—at the beginning, middle and end of the study period. Extensive field notes were taken and focused on the learner's behaviour (time on tasks, body language, etc.), classmate interactions and activities, the participant-instructor dynamic, the content being worked on, and any specific learning methods, strategies and/or accommodations that were employed. The observation checklist can be found in Appendix K.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a within-case perspective in order to code and classify important constructs, themes, and patterns in an interpretational analysis, based on the empirical questions listed in Chapter One. Both a structure analysis—relying on the interpretation of the meaning of the data—and a reflective analysis—relying on the principal investigator’s personal judgment and experience—were used (Gall et al., 2005). The interviews were transcribed and compiled chronologically. The participant was invited to review and edit his comments through a member checking process. The principal investigator either met with (once) or telephoned (twice) the participant after the interviews had been transcribed and read the transcripts to him. He was asked to stop the reading if he disagreed with any statements made or if he wanted to make any corrections. At the end of the reading he was asked if he approved the entire transcription. The date of approval was noted on the transcripts. Both the participant and the instructor were also asked to confirm the principal investigator’s interpretation of the themes and constructs identified in the findings. Unfortunately, the participant was not available for comment. The instructor commented, “I believe you have covered all the major themes with [Brian] and there isn’t anything I can add.”

Data were coded manually. This involved moving through text files, recording memos and notes, and developing indices and codes. A constant

comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed in order to develop themes and categories based on the collected data.

Credibility

A variety of strategies were used in order to establish a credible analysis of the data collected. In terms of instrumentation, triangulation was used as a method of data collection. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were then member checked and approved for accuracy. Also, observations included thick descriptions so as to collect the most data possible for analysis.

Methodological Assumptions

The principal investigator made the assumption that current Literacy and Basic Skills programming is not meeting the needs of learners with specific learning difficulties. This study objectively examined the specific factors that increase and possibly hinder the chances for these learners to reach their goals. The principal investigator also assumed that there was a holistic component to these success factors in that the information gleaned from this study was not entirely academic or curricular in nature but included social, emotional, and psychological issues as well.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the nature of the research design—case study—it was important to utilize measures of confidentiality to protect the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the report, and appropriate modifications were made to ensure that

identifying information could not be deciphered. Participants were given a document outlining the confidentiality procedures. The informed consent form was signed by the participant, the other classmates, and the instructor to ensure that they understood it. Participant rights were also outlined in terms of having the freedom to discontinue their involvement at any time and to verify/member check the transcripts from the interview sessions.

Approval of this study was granted on April 23, 2007 by the Brock University Research Ethics Review Board (file # 06-258 Gill). See Appendix L–Clearance Letter.

Dissemination

This report will be made available through public circulation at the Brock University Instructional Resource Centre. It will also be submitted to the National Adult Literacy Database as a full-text document to be accessible through pdf download. In addition, it will be made available to all of the participants of the study, including the learners, instructor, and all of the local literacy agencies.

Summary

The focus of this study was to identify the holistic factors of success for adult basic education learners with specific learning difficulties. A case study design was implemented, and triangulation of data was utilized in the form of document analysis, participant interviews, instructor questionnaires, and

observation. The data gained from the study were coded to reveal emerging themes around the research question.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The following review of findings will begin with an overview of the information gathered from the data collection. Following this, the major themes and constructs will be discussed in relation to increasing the factors of success for learners with specific learning difficulties.

Findings

Data were gathered in three sessions: at the beginning, middle, and end of the study period. At each stage of the study, the participant was interviewed and observed in the classroom, and the instructor was given a questionnaire. During the middle and the end stages of the study period, portfolio documents were also collected.

Findings from the Beginning of the Study

Brian (pseudonym), in his early 40s, was assessed by the local literacy network in mid-May 2007. Brian had completed grade 8 but only part of grade 9. His first language was English, and he did not speak any additional languages. He had been out of school since the late 1970s. He informed the assessor that he enjoyed technical classes in high school (i.e., woodworking, bricklaying, welding) but did not enjoy any academic subjects. He was placed in a special education class in middle school and was entered into a vocational school for secondary studies. He reported that he was assessed as a "slow learner" in elementary school but did not have any details from that assessment. It was

identified by a learning styles inventory that he had a strong preference for kinaesthetic learning.

From the assessment it was determined that Brian was functioning at Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Level 3 (approximately grade 4-5) for reading, LBS Level 2 (approximately grade 2-3) for writing, and LBS Level 2-3 (approximately grade 3-4) for math. He had difficulty hearing sounds in the correct order and had difficulty recalling and retaining oral information. He also had difficulty recognizing vowels when reading and sometimes transposed, omitted letters, or made sequencing errors. He occasionally guessed when decoding and had significant difficulty with reading comprehension. However, he was able to focus on the reading, writing, and math tasks given and persevered with tasks until completion.

Brian set long-term goals based on his interests and abilities and understood the need to achieve his goals. He was able to advocate for himself and seemed motivated to learn. Brian was able to identify his strengths and weaknesses in both academic and social situations. He attempted tasks independently and had a positive attitude of learning and of himself. Brian was referred by the literacy network to the local literacy council small group class for reading, writing, and math instruction. This referral was precipitated by the fact that Brian was functioning at LBS 3 or lower for each subject area and the literacy council specializes in programming for low-level learners.

The first interview and observation session took place on June 19, 2007.

Brian was very forthcoming about his past, explaining that he was a recovering alcoholic and now, being sober for over a year, had the motivation to upgrade his skills. He said, "I want to go back to school . . . I am frustrated." Brian's goals were to upgrade his basic skills, write his GED (General Educational Development) test, and move on to an apprenticeship. His goal was "to get a career."

Brian had many skills. He enjoyed playing the guitar and used his mechanical skills while building car models. He could "repair anything," and he had a lot of experience as a carpenter and painter.

Brian reported that he was comfortable with his decoding skills but that he had always struggled with spelling and reading comprehension. He mentioned that vowels were very challenging. Math was always a strong subject for Brian. He was able to find ways to solve problems, even if he was unsure of the "proper" way to do the activity. He was also very comfortable with his social skills. When discussing his AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings, he reported, "I have no problem gettin' up." He was also able to advocate for himself. Brian shared that he used to advocate by yelling and being aggressive but realized that he needed different strategies because "yelling... it don't get you nowhere."

Unfortunately, Brian's home life was not good at the time of the first interview. He lived with his girlfriend, and their relationship had been rocky. Thankfully, Brian and his mother had a very good relationship. She was very

supportive of Brian upgrading his skills. The class was also a source of support. When it was mentioned that he could move in with his mother and transfer to another program closer to his mother, he said, "I don't want to transfer because I fit in . . . I'm very comfortable there . . . and we're all supporting each other."

Brian was very proud of himself at the time of the interview because of the changes he had made and his involvement in the class. He felt very positive about the class in the 3 weeks that he had been participating and said, "I've come a long way in just 3 weeks." He was very excited about his quick improvement and had moments like, "Ah, that's it!" where he would remember skills he had forgotten.

The observation session happened on the same day as the interview. The class was made up of 6 core participants. Classes were held three times weekly. Brian participated actively in class and offered answers. He appeared comfortable and relaxed. There was a lot of humour and a lot of conversation in the class—some of it very personal. All participants seemed comfortable with one another—they conversed openly about their day, weekend, social events, and class content. All members actively took part in discussions and engaged each other with questions.

During the class, the homework of the previous session was taken up. The learners took turns reading the questions, and they discussed the answers as a class. They went on to work on a grammar exercise that they had completed independently and then took it up together. Then they worked on a personal

budget. This was also an independent activity where the instructor went around to each learner individually to offer assistance. Brian worked with another classmate, and they appeared to work well together. The instructor offered a lot of positive reinforcement and support to the learners. She appeared to be cognizant of how the learners were doing and was quick to step in if the learners needed further explanation or assistance. She also questioned them about the activities in terms of whether they found it easy or challenging and if they would like to do that type of activity in the future. She encouraged the learners to bring in materials from home to work on, such as various forms. She also attempted to bring the learners back to task frequently.

It was learned through the first questionnaire given to the instructor that she had been in the field of education for 5 years and an instructor for 9 months. Sue (pseudonym) reported that her class was run on a learner-centred model where each learner identified his/her personal goals. She used a goal-setting workbook and also encouraged her learners to attend goal-setting workshops put on by the council. Sue also incorporated authentic documents related to learners' specific goals.

Sue had some basic professional development around specific learning difficulties. She had attended a 2-hour workshop and had training in the Simultaneous Multi-Sensory Teaching (SMT) method. SMT is a language re-education method. It was developed to meet the needs of learners of all ages who need a thorough knowledge of the structure of written language and a firm

understanding of the association of sounds and symbols before applying the rules of written language (Canadian Dyslexia Centre, n.d.). Sue estimated that between 50 and 60% of the learners with whom she had worked have specific learning difficulties and that to help her learners, she planned lessons that encompassed all learning styles.

She encouraged her learners to talk about their specific learning difficulties both with her directly and also with classmates. She assisted her learners to self-evaluate by giving them end-of-level activities and encouraged them to mark their own work. She stated that she created a supportive environment through "praise, acceptance, [a] nonjudgemental attitude, and discouraging comparison." She reported that she incorporated social skills into her teaching by addressing such topics as lateness, burping, respecting others, and hygiene issues. She also discussed issues of self-esteem by incorporating activities that allowed learners to exchange ideas, which she says "promotes self-confidence and self-esteem."

The first stage of data collection revealed a wealth of information about the participant, the instructor, as well as the class dynamic. Brian had a positive attitude about learning and was motivated to succeed. He felt at home in the class and felt that he was progressing rapidly. The class itself appeared to be a support network where all the learners could feel welcome. The instructor attempted to incorporate many strategies in order to foster both academic and personal progress.

Findings from the Middle of the Study

During the second participant interview (August 21, 2007), Brian commented that he still wanted to get his GED but would like to pursue training or a career in computers. This was very different from his original plan to pursue an apprenticeship. This goal change was due to hearing that there were many jobs in the area of computers—such as being a computer technician. As his main goal was to find employment, he was open to many possibilities.

After having been in the class for approximately 2 months, he described his relationship with his instructor as “awesome.” His relationship with his other classmates was also positive, as he said, “they all like me.”

In terms of progress, he reported that his reading comprehension was better and he was more comfortable with writing as well. He was learning how to work with capitals correctly, writing sentences, and even paragraphs. He reports,

Well I’m workin’ on reading a story, breakin’ it down. I can tell ya about it. . . . I’m getting better at that. . . . Writing is a lot better. . . . Well just capitals . . . going to small. Learning how to write a sentence where I couldn’t before. Learn how to write two paragraphs now. Like I couldn’t do before.

His math skills had also improved, although he still had difficulty with fractions and long division. Aside from reading, writing, and math instruction, the learners also participated in a class where they had time to work on their

homework but also discussed politics or other topics outside of academics. Brian enjoyed this class but felt he really wanted to focus on improving his math skills.

Brian commented that the activities and structured workbooks were helpful when learning. However, he also mentioned that homework was sometimes difficult on his own, but he felt confident attempting it because he knew that he could take it to class to take up and the instructor and other classmates would help him to understand it. He said, "When I come to an answer . . . then it's like okay I'll wait . . . take it back to school 'cause I know we're going to bring it up and mark it around the table anyways."

When asked about his strengths, he immediately commented that math was his best subject. He knew his times tables and felt that investing in learning them was important to success in math. He commented, "How can you learn when you keep depending on a chart?" He also enjoyed the timed math drills that were done in class as it got "the memory goin' right quick." Brian said that "we all [had] different strengths . . . help[ed] each other out," and that's why they worked so well together. Brian was very good at math, whereas some of the other learners had strengths in reading and/or writing, so they would help each other. Brian still identified spelling and reading comprehension as his specific learning difficulties.

Brian identified several learning strategies that he perceived to assist him in the class. He frequently used a dictionary to check his spelling. He was able to "write it down and . . . look at it. . . . [He could] tell you if it's wrong or right." He

also found assistance with phonics—sounding words out and breaking words into syllables—was helpful. In addition, he felt that spelling tests helped him increase his skills, because after completing a test they would discuss the words together.

It was also mentioned that the small group class type was beneficial. Brian said, “[It gave] you more time with the teachers. . . . I’ve learned more than I would in a classroom.” He explained that the class was not like a traditional classroom in that students sit in rows and listen to the teacher. The small group was more interactive.

Brian also commented that motivation was the key to success. He said, “Yeah. Anybody can do it . . . you have to have the ability of wanting to do it . . . that’s the big thing . . . wanting to do it.”

The second observation session happened the same day. Brian was excited and animated at the beginning of class and engaged his fellow classmates in discussion. The first exercise was to continue reading a play on which they were working together as a class. Each learner had a part to read in the play. Brian offered to be two characters. He was able to self-correct and read punctuation well and read quite fluently. The instructor helped when necessary by leading Brian (this is where the instructor would repeat the word right before the error so Brian could find his mistake and correct it). The instructor also offered encouragement when Brian was not sure of a word and praised Brian when he had finished. Sue went on to explain how to read for effect and discussed strategies to decode unfamiliar words. The mood of the class was light, with

various conversational exchanges, and all learners helped each other when reading.

The class then moved on to working on a reading comprehension activity. The instructor went over the activity in detail and had the class read it together by taking turns before assigning it as an independent activity. The instructor provided individual assistance when needed. The class ended with Sue sharing an oral riddle on the board. The learners seemed to enjoy adding humour to the classroom.

During the second observation, Brian's work to date was reviewed. He had completed a large number and a wide variety of exercises in the short time he had been involved with the class. Activities reviewed included core curriculum activities such as reading comprehension tasks, math worksheets, and practical writing activities (writing a letter), as well as self-assessment checklists and evidence of working on authentic materials. His training plan was also reviewed. It included short- and long-term goals in the areas of reading, writing, math, and self-management.

The second instructor questionnaire focused on progress to date and other issues that may have come up with Brian to that point. Sue did not make any specific comments around progress due to the fact that Brian had not been in the class for very long but did mention that self-evaluation was used quite regularly in the early stages of the program. She described her relationship with Brian as facilitator to learner; she considered herself to be his guide rather than direct

instructor. Sue observed that Brian had a “reasonably good self-esteem” and that he was “confident and comfortable with the group.” She went on to say that he liked to be challenged and learns well in the group setting. Outside of reading, writing, and math instruction, she attempted to address self-management and self-direction skills as well as computer skills and skills that are directly related to employment (for example, completing forms, writing notes, or reading authentic workplace documents).

The findings from the middle of the study complemented and extended the findings from the beginning. Brian had considered changing his long-term career goal; however his training goals stayed the same. He felt comfortable in the class and appeared to be progressing. The instructor continued to offer a variety of activities using different learning methods to ensure that everyone understood the material and was able to increase their skills.

Findings from the End of the Study

The final participant interview took place on September 21, 2007. Brian’s goal of upgrading to get his GED remained the same. His main goal was to “get back to work.” He was getting a tutor with the literacy council in order to “get extra work.” He noted some frustration around his goal path, as he held the understanding that he needed his GED in order to get an apprenticeship (which was true), but one of his instructors said that they only require previous experience. He was reassured during the interview that his goal path was appropriate.

Brian related that the situation with his girlfriend was better and that they were working on their relationship. He explained that a lot of the difficulty he was having at home stemmed from his childhood. His father was an alcoholic, and there was violence in the home. There was very little affection in his family, and Brian realized that his past experiences were affecting him in his current relationship. He reported that he's "trying to change [himself] . . . to be a better loving person."

His relationship with Sue remained very positive. He said, "She's an easy-goin' person. . . . She knows what she's talkin' about." He also reported a strong relationship with his classmates by saying, "They all love me."

He also shared his thoughts on his progress. Brian commented that he was much more comfortable working with syllables and reported that his spelling had gotten a lot better. Math continued to be his best subject, and he repeated his desire to work on complex math such as fractions and algebra. Brian reported that the most valuable thing he was getting from the class was self-confidence. "It's a lot higher today than what it used to be."

Brian felt very strongly that the one-to-one time with the instructor really helped him to progress. He said, "Everything's awesome at school. Everything's . . . I got no problems, no complaints or nothin', the teachers are very well... if I have a problem they're there to work it out." He reported that the most difficult tasks were completing activities that focused on new skills as opposed to practicing skills already learned. He commented, "Oh things are difficult, like

they want us to keep a diary. . . . I've never kept a diary in my life." The principal investigator then asked, "So just brand new skills are hard?" Brian replied, "Yeah that's right." Brian related that the class has really helped him increase his confidence and be more outgoing. "Today I'm just an open person. I have no problem."

Brian's difficulties remained the same throughout the study period; spelling and reading comprehension were still difficult. However, he reported that he was beginning to feel more comfortable and confident with them. He stated that the exercises were helpful and the spelling tests seemed to help him as he was forced to study his words. He commented that the instructor also created activities based on what the learners in the class needed.

Brian's intention at the end of the study period was to continue with the class and a tutor until he was ready to further his upgrading in a classroom environment. The literacy council served learners only at LBS Levels 1-3. Therefore, if he wanted to continue his upgrading he would have to transfer to a different program that served learners at Levels 4-5.

The final observation session took place on September 25, 2007. The class focused on a workbook lesson of reading comprehension. Each learner had a chance to read a section of the passage, and then they discussed the questions that followed. During the readings the instructor asked context questions to monitor reading comprehension. She also shared personal experiences around the topic and asked deeper questions around the content to engage the class in

discussion. She consistently offered positive reinforcement and encouragement. She assisted the learners' reading by leading them (such as in the second observation). She explained how to read with inflection and how to read punctuation. The class was given time to complete the questions independently, and then they were taken up together. Brian appeared jovial but focused. He was not able to complete all of the questions before they were taken up as a class but followed along with the discussion of the answers. He was able to recount sections of the story orally but seemed to have difficulty when answering the questions in writing.

As with the other observation sessions, the mood of the class was light and encouraging. The instructor needed to bring the class back to task several times due to conversation outside the content.

During the final observation Brian's work completed to date was reviewed for a second time. As with the first collection, the second collection contained core curriculum activities around reading, writing, and math. Authentic activities were also evident; for example, he completed an activity that used an advertisement as the reading component. A writing sample was also in this set of work that asked Brian to describe himself to someone who knew nothing about him. He wrote the following:

I am a very special man with a lot of talent. I like to play music on the guitar, build model cars, and paint the parts. I enjoy going to my evening meeting. I love meeting people from all over the world. I am a very easy

going man, love talking, like learning different things in life. I like taking road trips. Like taking on challenges.

Also contained in his workbook were activities that focused on him as a person; for example, there was an activity titled, "Think About What Changes You Want to Make" where he had to address changes such as his addiction and his attitude. There was also an activity around conflict styles.

His training plan remained the same from the second observation. He had, however, completed a demonstration of his progress in communications. This demonstration was an authentic activity that asked Brian to look at a chart from the local automobile club and answer questions related to the chart. He achieved a perfect score on the activity. He was also asked to complete a self-evaluation that contained questions such as, "Did you find this demonstration hard to do? and "Do you think you need more practice?

Sue, in the final questionnaire, maintained that she and Brian continued to have a good relationship. She reported that he appeared to "project more self-confidence and [was] proud of his accomplishments." Sue stated that Brian had the advantage of family and group supports as well as counselling support and personal drive. Her philosophy when working with learners with specific learning difficulties is to "treat all students in the same manner and make accommodations where necessary." She commented that, as she gained knowledge and experience, she was better able to adapt materials to suit

individual needs. Sue planned to continue seeking professional development opportunities to increase her knowledge base.

Data collected at the end of the study showed the consistency in Brian's goal path as well as his comfort with the class and his commitment to increasing his skills. As with the other two data collection sessions, several types of learning activities had been introduced and several learning strategies had been employed, including providing activities that allowed learners to reflect on themselves. The instructor expressed her commitment to her learners and her interest in increasing her skill set when working with learners with specific learning difficulties.

Progress Achieved Throughout the Study Period

Although Brian did not move up in terms of his assessed Literacy and Basic Skills levels in reading, writing, and math, several gains were made in terms of his skill set within his current levels—as each LBS level contains a wide range of skills, making significant progress possible within the same level. In her final questionnaire at the end of the study period, Sue reported that Brian had improved in reading and math. She commented that Brian had improved in his ability to read dialogue and was doing “considerably better in using the inflection in his voice. He is more aware of his comma usage and stopping at the end of a sentence.” She also reported that Brian had “greatly improved in his ability to solve word problems.”

Brian self-evaluated his progress and reported that he improved his skills to be a successful student such as setting clear goals, working independently, planning and managing his time appropriately, and problem solving. In terms of academic skills Brian reported that he had improved his reading skills by being more comfortable with syllable breakdowns. Also, during the observation session he was able to read fluently, self-correct when reading aloud, and was able to read punctuation. He reported, "My readin' has come along a lot better." He was also more confident with his spelling. He related, "I could sit down today and write a letter if I had to . . . or email . . . like I couldn't do before." His math skills had also improved. He commented, "It's usually running 99%." He also stated that he "didn't expect to move as quick as [he] did."

Although an increase in Literacy and Basic Skills levels was not achieved during the study period, Brian gained many skills both academically and personally, and this was documented by the instructor, by Brian, and by the principal investigator. Brian left the program on November 20, 2007 because he obtained full-time employment. Therefore, Brian achieved his ultimate goal of finding employment to become more independent.

Emerging Themes

There were many factors that seemed to contribute to Brian's success in the class. These factors centred around specific learning strategies employed in the class; specific characteristics of the instructor, learner, and the class as a whole; and evidence of Brian's self-transformation.

Learning Methods and Strategies

Various learning methods and strategies were employed in this class. Learning methods included instructor-directed teaching, co-operative learning, self-directed learning, continual instructor support, and being learner centred. General learning strategies employed were the use of core curriculum, authentic documents, as well as activities that would be considered as "outside academics." Specific learning strategies included the use of phonics, repetition, using assistive resources, and using activities that appealed to various learning styles.

Learning methods. During the observation sessions it was apparent that Sue used a combination of instructor-directed teaching and co-operative learning. The class worked on several activities within each class. Sue would introduce an activity, review all the components, do several of the questions with the class, field questions, and then ask the learners to work on their own or in small groups to complete the activity. For example, in the first observation session Sue introduced an activity that dealt with cookbook terms. She first facilitated a discussion around known terms, then reviewed the instructions for matching the term to the definition, did a few of the matches together as a class, and then allowed the class to have time to complete the activity during class time.

Co-operative learning was very important to Brian. Brian commented that a constant in the class was group work and that it really assisted him when completing activities. He reported, "She explains it . . . as we're going around . . .

like I read the first one and the other girl beside me reads the other one. . . . Next thing you know, I had mine all finished." Sue commented that Brian "likes to be challenged and learns very well in a group setting." During the observation session it was noted that homework was reviewed as a class, where the learners took turns reading the questions and all discussed the answers. A common strategy used during activities was to give the learners individual time to complete tasks and then it was taken up as a class.

In addition, the instructor valued self-directed learning:

Students assess skills they have or need. We encourage students to ask questions and formulate their own answers. We ask them to propose problems. In portfolio class, students must find ways to practice and improve the skills they need, depending on their learning path.

Instructor support was also important. Sue commented that key features of her teaching style included, "treat[ing] all students in the same manner," explaining expectations, offering assistance, and offering accommodations when necessary. During the observation sessions it was noted that Sue went around the room and worked individually with each learner during periods of independent study. She also "checked in" with the learners after the task was completed, asking monitoring questions such as, "Does everyone understand the concept?" and "Does anyone have any questions?" Brian added, "If there's two or three of us that don't understand it she'll say okay . . . pay attention . . . I'll show you how to do it. You know . . . and we all learn."

Learner-centred strategies were also employed when the instructor asked the class what types of forms they wanted or needed to work on. Sue asked the learners to think about what forms they have come across at home or in the community such as job applications, bank forms, and so on. She encouraged the learners to bring in forms that they needed to work on so that she could help them. And finally, the instructor also provided examples of the content using personal stories so as to connect the material to real-life situations. During an observation session, the class was working on an activity about diets. Sue offered information around her own eating habits in order to encourage sharing and discussion.

Learning strategies. Brian was asked to complete core workbooks. A series was used entitled *Voyager: Reading and Writing for Today's Adults* (B. J. Smith, 1999). This was a nine-volume series that combined a theme-based approach with traditional instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking. Evidence of this work was documented in Brian's portfolio.

In addition, the instructor would have the class do quizzes. Brian describes his math quiz:

It's a challenge 'cause she does quizzes right. Yeah like that one there, where she gives us one page, two pages. . . . Yeah you have a certain time to get it all done . . . and you're rushin' through it. . . . Like I said I missed one, so it wasn't too bad, but . . . you get the memory goin' right quick.

Spelling quizzes were also used.

Well she gives us like 15 or 16 words. Go home and practice it. And I go home and I practice it . . . and I seem to do okay but I get back to the class and it's like . . . uh . . . but she tells me to go up on the chalk board, and it's like boom, it's there.

In terms of the use of authentic documents, Brian worked on fractions by answering questions about a recipe. "There was a recipe for 5 dozen cookies . . . ; now she wanted to take it and double it. Yeah 10 dozen." He also worked on basic operations through an activity that dealt with getting his car repaired. Brian said, "Like say ah... if you need this size tire [or] spark plugs... so you figure you have to add it all together and then it comes up to what he has to pay to get his car fixed." In addition, the instructor encouraged the learners to bring in any forms from home, work, or the community that they had difficulty with so they could work on them in class. Activities that used authentic documents were noted in the portfolio.

A key multisensory reading activity that was observed was reading a script as a class. This allowed the learners to not only use visual and auditory learning styles but also engage with the other classmates. Brian commented:

'Cause they're doin' a play in class right now. . . . We all read different parts 'n stuff. That's been pretty good. Vampire . . . vampire story or something like that. It's pretty cool. We're all changin' voices. . . . We all get active, right. We all get a part. We all change our voices . . . that we think that the part is. It's pretty cool.

Not all of the activities in the class focused directly on reading, writing, and math skills. Many activities were designed to engage the learners through self-awareness activities or social issues. Sue, the instructor, reported:

I work on things such as lateness, burping, respect for others, and hygiene issues. We discuss self-esteem, and I ask for feedback. We have various learning activities that allow students to exchange ideas. This promotes self-confidence and self-esteem.

She also commented that she worked on self-management and self-direction and the ability to work—skills such as arriving on time and calling if they are going to be late. Noted in Brian's portfolio were activities such as a checklist and questions about what changes he wanted to make in his life, a conflict styles questionnaire, a self-assessment activity pertaining to the skills needed to be a successful student, and a communication checklist. Brian commented that in portfolio class, "Some days [they would] sit and talk about politics . . . or around the table or . . . depending on the topic that somebody [brought] up or whatever." The core curriculum materials also contained topics for discussion such as weight loss and personal eating habits.

Phonics instruction was viewed as important to support both the reading and writing components of the class. Brian described this as, "She's . . . teachin' us how to break it down, like I told you. How to break it down and put the slashes in." When observing the class reading it was noted that the instructor assisted learners to identify their errors and helped them sound out unfamiliar

words. She also asked context or comprehension monitoring questions to aid in reading comprehension.

Repetition was encouraged to reinforce learning. "Sometimes I have to go over and over it and over it a couple of times, which is good . . . there's nothing wrong with that. That way you're checkin' your work to make sure it's right."

Along with repetition, the instructor also offered a variety of examples when helping learners to understand a concept.

Assistive resources were also used in the class such as a chart of the times tables and dictionaries. Brian mentioned, "I usually get a dictionary if I don't know how to spell . . . 'cause roughly I know how to spell it."

Activities that were adaptable to various learning styles were also important. The instructor commented, "Visually and auditory allow them to use any coping mechanisms they need." She went on to say that "lesson planning encompass[ed] all learning styles." In relation to Brian, Sue reported, "He is a hands-on learner and needs to be actively engaged." Therefore, it was important not only to present various ways of completing tasks but also to understand the preferences of the learners in the classroom.

All of these learning methods and strategies seemed to have a positive impact on learner success, proven by participant self-assessment, instructor assessment, as well as observation.

Instructor Characteristics and the Instructor/Learner Dynamic

Sue had been in the field of education for 5 years and a small group instructor for 9 months at the time of this study. She had been involved in two professional development workshops focusing on specific learning difficulties and planned to participate in upcoming workshops as well continue to discuss issues around LDs with her colleagues. Sue also had experience working with learners with specific learning difficulties. She commented that about 50-60% of the learners she had worked with have had specific learning difficulties.

She stated that she created a supportive classroom environment “through praise, acceptance, [a] nonjudgemental attitude, and discouraging comparison.” Sue’s use of positive reinforcement was noted in the observations. Also noted during the observation was her friendly demeanour and her interest in the students, both academically and personally. She also offered examples from her own life related to the material being covered so as to build a reciprocal relationship with the learners.

She saw her role as a “teacher/facilitator. Most times I am guiding . . . as opposed to giving direct instruction.” She went on to say that as she “gain[ed] experience and knowledge of the students [she was] better able to adapt materials to suit individual students’ needs.”

For the instructor-learner relationship to work there needs to be a goodness of fit between the instructor and the learner. Goodness of fit is the concept of matching temperaments or traits with instructional and learning

styles (Heineman, 1995). The dynamic observed between the instructor and the participant appeared to exemplify this model, as Brian stated, "I'm very comfortable [here]. . . . I like the teachers and I'm getting what I need. . . . I think just the way she is . . . she's easy-goin', we got no problems." In addition, Sue commented that "we have a good rapport and can share a laugh." The positive relationship between the instructor and participant was also noted in his portfolio. When completing a self-assessment he wrote that he had improved in relation to talking to the teacher if personal problems were making it hard for him to manage and asking for help if he had problems. It seemed that both the background of the instructor as well as the goodness of fit between the instructor and the participant contributed to success.

Learner Characteristics

Various characteristics of the participant were observed that seemed to contribute to his success in the class. These characteristics included a positive self-esteem and self-confidence, the ability to self-advocate, self-determination, self-awareness, and a joy of learning.

Positive self-esteem and self-confidence. Brian could identify his strengths and was proud of them. In his portfolio he wrote, "I am a very special man with a lot of talent." He discussed his experience fixing a computer when he said:

That's the one thing . . . I can look at something and I can tell . . . they're basically the same, and it's the same plug-in that's gonna go in . . . And I can watch how I'm takin' the one apart . . . so when I go take the other one

apart I'll just slap the other one right in soon as I get it apart and put it in and then put the old one in. . . . It's a lot better.

Later he went on to say, "I'm good at repairing anything. . . . I'm a painter . . . a woodworker with real wood. . . . I've done it . . . all of it . . . it's all up here." With regards to the class he stated that

I'm actually doing something with my life today instead of just sitting around wasting it. I've done enough of that. [I go to my] AA meetings on a regular basis, I'm going to school now . . . like, things are going very well for me. . . . I'm very proud of myself today.

Brian also noted that his self-confidence was much higher as a result of the class. He says, "It's a lot higher today than what it used to be." The class "picks you up." Sue also mentioned his increase of self-esteem and self-confidence during the data collection of the middle of the study. Also, in a checklist completed for his portfolio he checked that he had improved a little with regards to believing what he had to say was valuable. His positive self-esteem and his increased self-confidence were evident throughout the study period and proved to positively impact his progress as he could identify his strengths and build on them. He felt comfortable participating in class and sought out the instructor for assistance when needed.

Self-advocacy. Self-advocacy also played an important role in learner success. Brian was able to identify his needs and articulate them clearly to the appropriate people. In the past, Brian self-advocated by becoming aggressive

and confrontational. He stated, "Well in the past, if I didn't like their way I told 'em that. And most of the time they didn't like the way I come back." However, Brian's approach is now different:

To keep it in a calm, collective way, right. Instead of just losing it and yelling and everything else . . . 'cause I know yelling . . . it don't get you nowhere. Just sit down calm and . . . go over the situation. . . . We all have our own different opinions.

An example of Brian's ability to self-advocate was seen in his interaction with his case manager. Before being assessed and referred to the literacy council, Brian's case manager encouraged him to attend school fulltime. This would mean a classroom setting, not the small group model which was only available part-time. He explained to her that "I prefer what I'm doin' now. 'Cause it's a smaller class. And [if I was in a class] I wouldn't [get] the attention that I need." He also discussed his alcoholism and said:

And like I tell the people you know... I'm not ashamed... I have a disease. So it's just like anything else I'm not ashamed of what I have. As long as I stay away from that... I'm okay.

Brian's appropriate self-advocacy skills allowed him to continue in an environment that he knew was best for him.

Self-determination. Brian repeatedly exhibited self-determination to improve his skills to reach his goals. When he decided he was going to pursue upgrading he knew it was time. He said, "I was sick and tired. I just had enough.

So I just said, that's it." He was determined to "get back to work. And make money . . . instead of being on assistance." He brought this determination to his work in the class as well. When discussing his methods for working independently at home he reported:

Well I'll play with it for a little while until I get frustrated. I get frustrated I'll just leave it . . . go do something else . . . come back later, and then maybe it'll come back to me. If no one's around you have to break it down somehow to get the answer. I'll struggle with it for a while. I won't just look at it and give up.

Brian said that the work kept him going and he said, "It keeps me in the frame of mind right." He was determined to keep going and realized that it may take him some time to achieve his goals. He said, "Oh I have a long ways to go for this."

Brian testified that a key factor in success was motivation. "Anybody can do it. . . . You have to have the ability of wanting to do it . . . that's the big thing . . . wanting to do it. 'Cause if you ain't got [motivation] you ain't gonna get nowhere." Brian's drive was evident when he said, "It's like I want to keep moving ahead right. And I'm willing to do whatever I have to do." Brian's self-determination kept him in the class and focused on achieving his goals.

Self-awareness. Brian was aware and able to express his specific learning difficulties and goals and identify his preferred learning styles. Brian had to learn the hard way through his addiction that it is imperative that he be aware of his strengths, weaknesses, and feelings. When relating a story about abstaining from

alcohol at a party he said, "I knew there was goin' to be a lot of booze. . . . That was the one I was gonna have a hard time with. . . . It was good. I had my mom's support." He went on to comment on his living situation by saying:

I gotta get out of this situation 'cause it's not good for me. I don't want to hang around with the old people that I used to hang around. 'Cause it's just a matter of time if I hang around them that I'd be usin', and I don't want that.

Since becoming sober Brian has worked hard to improve himself as a person. When discussing his relationship with his girlfriend he explained, "I'm finding it's my problem. I have a problem with . . . uh . . . showing affection. I'm working on it." He also understood the importance of skills upgrading when he stated, "You need it in life, it doesn't matter what, what it is." These skills helped him self-evaluate in the class. He was able to identify areas he needed to work on, complete self-evaluation activities, and mark his own work.

Brian was able to describe his specific learning difficulties in very specific terms related to the subject matter:

I have problems right now with readin' a small story . . . and then . . . answering the questions . . . a, b, c. Did the story start at the beginning, middle, end. I got a hard time with that. My problem is if I read it I don't get it. If you read it to me . . . I would understand it. So I got to practice that.

He went on to say, "I got a problem . . . and most of the time my problem is readin' the question. You explain it to me and I can do it . . . but for me to do it on my own . . . I'm probably 50-50." With regards to writing, when asked if he had any difficulty thinking of what to write, he said, "Nope." He reported his difficulty was in the mechanics and said, "It's doing it." Sue encouraged the learners to discuss their specific learning difficulties in "discussion, small groups, and individual attention." Being able to identify his major challenges was beneficial for Brian as it gave him a focus when upgrading.

Brian also had very clear goals which helped him maintain his focus and drive. His main goal, which was sustained throughout the study period and beyond, was "to get a career. I want to get back to work." He was very clear when he related:

This is my goal. To get good enough in my reading, writing, and math to do the GED test at the first shot so I can go to [college] and take a course.

I'd like to go through for an electrician or a plumber.

Brian even set timelines for himself when he said, "My goal is to do my GED . . . by next September." In his training plan for the class he was able to set short-term goals in reading, writing, math, and self-management by specific dates. His ability to set realistic goals clearly helped him to stay focused and driven to complete his upgrading.

He also understood his own learning style. "I'm hands-on." In relation to working in class he stated, "Well I'm a lot better when someone is explaining it

to me. I understand it a lot more, like I said before, if I read it I get a complete different thing. If you read it to me I can understand it more." He also reported, "I pick up on things pretty quick. . . . You told me the job . . . and I can do it . . . and I can run with it. It doesn't matter if I'm alone or in a group." He further explained that because he needed directions explained "properly," he preferred working one-to-one, which was why he also pursued working with a tutor aside from the small group class. By understanding his learning style and specific learning difficulties he was better able to get the support that he needed.

Enjoying learning. Finally, there was the fact that Brian enjoyed being in the class and he enjoyed learning. He commented, "[I] look forward to going. I enjoy bein' there. . . . Well it can be fun." His motivation and drive coupled with his enjoyment of the learning experience made it easy for Brian to stick with the class and the work.

Brian exhibited many characteristics that seemed to increase his potential for success. His positive self-esteem gave him the self-confidence to participate actively in class and connect with the instructor for assistance when needed. Also, due to his positive view of himself, he was able to identify his strengths and build on them. Self-advocacy also played a role in Brian's success. He had to advocate for his decision to join the small group class that only ran part-time instead of the fulltime programs that his case manager had encouraged him to attend. Brian's determination was evidenced again and again during the study period. His determination kept him focused on his goals and therefore kept him

engaged in the class and the work. Brian also had self-awareness and was therefore able to identify his specific learning difficulties in order to focus his work on improving his weaknesses, set clear and realistic goals to achieve success, and identify his learning styles in order to have his learning needs met. Along with all of these characteristics, Brian also enjoyed the class and enjoyed learning, which contributed to his overall growth as a learner.

Class Characteristics

Throughout the study period there was a clear sense, both from the interviews with the participant as well as the observation sessions, that the class acted as both a support network and a social network for Brian. Although he had a lot of support from his mom who was "behind [him] 100%," the class itself seemed to provide his primary source of support. Brian reported:

Oh we got a good group. If I'm readin' and they have a problem with the words and one of us knows it . . . we'll help the individual. So that's the thing I like about our class because we're all workin' together. We try to help each other.

Brian alluded to a reciprocal relationship:

And some of them in the class struggle right, with math . . . where I'm okay in math doin' certain things. . . . But if I do to spelling, where they're having trouble in math . . . they can help me at the spelling. So I'm noticin' that and they're noticin' that too. So . . . everybody had their good and bad points.

He added that "We all get along. And that's the main thing . . . you get along . . . the class goes a lot easier. And we're all supporting each other . . . which is the way it's supposed to be."

The class seemed to go beyond a classmate relationship to a social relationship when Brian commented, "They all like me. I took muffins in yesterday." Multiple class discussions were observed that included humour and general conversation. Personal information was also shared between learners, such as issues around income and diet.

Class structure was also important. He reported that small group, as opposed to a larger class environment, was working well for him:

It's givin' you more time with the teachers, givin' you more time but on one-on-one, even though there's only four of us or five of us in the class.

I'm learning more than I would in the classroom.

It was observed that most activities were done as a class, with small study units for independent work; group work in pairs of two was also encouraged. Class routine was also important to Brian as he commented, "Yeah you get into the routine, and you throw my routine and it's like oh my . . . now what am I goin' to do."

Overall, Brian seemed to thrive in the class environment, he also sought out a tutor to augment his training. He felt that this combination would work best for him as he said, "'Cause I have a feeling if I get a tutor . . . it's gonna be

able to push me a little bit more. 'Cause I'll be one-on-one . . . so I can get a little ahead."

Brian seemed to thrive in this small group environment because of the support of the classmates and the development of social relationships where he felt comfortable and relaxed. He also thought very strongly that the small size of the class (including pursuing working with a tutor), married with activities done as a class opposed to primarily independent work, provided the best environment for his learning needs.

Self-Transformation

Brian's journey of self-transformation began long before he entered the classroom but was furthered by his involvement. He was a "full-blown alcoholic by the age of 20." He had a past of criminal involvement and several attempts at rehabilitation. When asked what had changed in his life to seek sobriety he said, "Well before I was doing it for everybody else... I was doing it for a girlfriend... or I was doing it for a job. This time . . . I just had enough. I cannot go through this anymore." He rejoined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and had celebrated his 1-year anniversary before the study began. Being in the program and being sober motivated him to change. He reported, "Well, I'm not a perfect guy, I still have defects [of] character . . . 'cause I'm still working on myself." However, he commented that "I have a better frame of mind. [I'm] trying to change myself to be a better, loving person. It's hard but . . . it's coming."

He joined the class out of frustration because he could not reach his goals without upgrading his skills. He explained, "So I've been frustrated. So that's what basically got me here." But he testified that "I wouldn't be able to do this if I wouldn'ta changed the way I am. 'Cause I wouldn't have the attitude right. The frame of mind." He went on to say:

Instead of wasting my time like I was before. Now I'm actually doing something. I should have done it a long time ago but . . . that's the past. I'm living today . . . doing the best I can today and not hurting anybody. Just being the best I can be.

He reported that "I am very proud of myself today," and when asked if it was because of the changes he had made he replied, "Yup." He has changed the way he behaves in certain situations as he recounted, "That's the way I am today right. I do something wrong . . . or I feel like I didn't do it properly . . . I go back and fix it. That way I have a better conscience afterwards." With respect to the class he said,

Now I'm an easy-goin' person . . . which I wasn't before. 'Cause a year ago there's no way I would be doin' what I'm doin' today. There's no way, I wouldn't want to be around anybody. Now today, I'm an outgoing person. I like meetin' new people and . . . and if I can help . . . it doesn't matter what situation it is . . . I will try to lend a hand. That's just . . . the way I am.

Brian took the first step in transformation when he decided to beat his addiction. He furthered that transformation in the class by increasing his self-confidence and becoming more outgoing and more open to others around him. He prided himself on his transformation and was dedicated to continue his journey in the months to come.

Summary

The first stage of data collection revealed that Brian had a positive attitude about learning and was motivated to succeed. He felt comfortable in the class and was progressing. The class acted as a support network where all the learners worked together. The instructor incorporated many strategies in order to foster both academic and personal progress.

The findings derived from the middle of the study followed from the findings from the beginning. Brian's main goals stayed the same. He felt comfortable in the class and appeared to be progressing. The instructor continued to offer a variety of activities using different learning methods to ensure that everyone understood the material and was able to increase their skills.

At the end of the study, Brian's commitment to increasing his skills was clear. As with the other two data collection sessions, several types of learning activities were introduced and several learning strategies were employed, including providing activities that allowed learners to reflect on themselves. The instructor expressed her commitment to her learners and her interest in

increasing her skill set when working with learners with specific learning difficulties.

Although an increase in Literacy and Basic Skills levels was not achieved during the study period, Brian gained many skills both academically and personally, and this was documented by the instructor, by Brian, and by the principal investigator. Brian obtained full-time employment. Therefore, Brian achieved his ultimate goal of becoming more independent.

There were many factors that seemed to contribute to Brian's success in the class: differentiated learning methods and strategies employed in the class; specific characteristics of the instructor, learner, and the class as a whole; and evidence of Brian's self-transformation.

Learning methods included the use of both core and authentic activities. A key component of these activities was the use of methods for various learning styles. By utilizing both types of learning methods, Brian had both structure and a linear progression of skill development as well as opportunities to work on daily tasks to improve those skills. Various learning strategies were also employed. They included the use of phonics, repetition, the use of assistive resources, employing various learning styles, using self-directed learning, encouraging group work, and instructor support. These strategies seemed to have a positive impact on learner success, as evidenced in the participant self-assessment, instructor assessment, as well as observation.

In terms of instructor characteristics, it seemed that a background of involvement with learners with specific learning difficulties, as well as the goodness of fit between the instructor and the participant contributed to success.

The participant himself also exhibited many characteristics that seemed to align themselves with success. His positive self-esteem gave him the self-confidence to participate actively in class and connect with the instructor for assistance when needed. Also, due to his positive view of himself, he was able to identify his strengths and build on them. Self-advocacy also played a role in Brian's success. He had to advocate for his decision to join the small group class that ran only part-time instead of the fulltime programs his case manager encouraged him to attend. Brian's determination was evidenced repeatedly during the study period. His determination kept him focused on his goals and therefore kept him engaged in the class. Brian was self-aware and was therefore able to identify his specific learning difficulties in order to focus his work on improving his weaknesses, set clear and realistic goals to achieve success, and identify his learning styles in order to have his learning needs met. Most important, Brian also enjoyed the class and enjoyed learning, which contributed to his overall growth.

Characteristics of the class also played a role in Brian's success in the class. Brian seemed to thrive in this small group environment because of the support of the classmates and the development of a social relationship where he felt comfortable and relaxed. He also thought very strongly that the small size of the

class (including pursuing working with a tutor) combined with class work provided the best environment for his learning needs.

Brian took the first step in his own self-transformation when he decided to work to beat his addiction. He furthered his transformation in the class by making an effort to become more outgoing and more open to others around him. With renewed confidence, Brian prided himself on his transformation and was dedicated to continue his journey in the months to come.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

A significant number of adult literacy learners have specific learning difficulties. There are many resources that outline the general characteristics of adults with specific learning difficulties. However, this study sought to go beyond academics to get a picture of the holistic factors involved in the success of learners with specific learning difficulties.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the specific and holistic factors that increase the likelihood that adult literacy learners with specific learning difficulties could reach their goals and—possibly—transform their beliefs and values about themselves as learners.

The questions to be answered were:

1. What strategies were implemented to assist the learner to progress and reach his goals?
2. What characteristics of the instructor, learner, and classmates contributed to the learner reaching his goals?
3. Was there evidence of self-transformation observed through the shift in the learner's values and beliefs about himself?

This study utilized the theoretical framework of transformation theory, which suggests that transformation is a structural change that results in a fundamental shift in someone's beliefs and values. This transformation includes a social vision about the future and a struggle for freedom, equity, and

authenticity (Scott, 1998). This theory is based on conflict theory, as there must be something unsettling that inspires the transformation. Personal transformation is a passage from one set of values to another and results in the alignment of a cohesive self (Scott). These transformations happen through intense dialogue with others, constant questioning, and crucial thinking to make meaning (Scott).

The Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) classroom was the context for this case study research. LBS classes provide literacy services to adults 19 years of age and older who are proficient in English-speaking skills and have been out of the traditional school system for over a year (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). LBS programs focus on unemployed and underemployed individuals who need to upgrade their skills to pursue further education and training, find employment, or would like to increase their independence in relation to their literacy skills. LBS classes focus on reading, writing, math, speaking and listening, self-management and self-direction, and computer skills.

Specific learning difficulties are described as an unexpected and unexplained condition of people of average intelligence and is characterized by a significant delay in one or more areas of learning (Selikowitz, 1998). Specific learning difficulties can be seen in academic areas such as reading, writing, spelling, and math, as well as such areas as persistence, organization, and gross/fine motor control (Selikowitz). People with specific learning difficulties usually have difficulty completing tasks as quickly as others, pronouncing words

properly, comprehending reading, and attending and concentrating on specific tasks, among other difficulties (University of Warwick, 2004).

People with specific learning difficulties are more likely to be employed in low to moderate paying occupations (Riddell et al., 2001) and are more likely to be poorer than the general population (Emerson et al., 2005). Having specific learning difficulties can also undermine self-confidence which can affect relationships, specifically making and keeping friends (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004). However, academic and social resilience can be realized with the existence of intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support (Hutchinson et al., 2004).

Success in the Literacy and Basic Skills classroom is the combination of increasing one's skills as well as attaining a short/long-term goal. Although the participant's Literacy and Basic Skills levels did not increase during the study period, the participant gained many skills both academically and personally. The participant also achieved his goal of full-time employment. There were many factors that seemed to contribute to the participant's success: specific learning methods and strategies employed in the class; specific characteristics of the instructor, learner, and the class as a whole; and evidence of the participant's self-transformation. These factors were identified through documents analysis, interviews, questionnaires, and class observation sessions.

Learning methods utilized included instructor-directed teaching, co-operative learning, and self-directed learning. Various learning strategies were

also employed. They included the use of core and authentic activities, phonics, repetition, the use of assistive resources, and the employment of various learning styles. The participant perceived that these methods and strategies seemed to have a positive impact on his success.

In terms of instructor characteristics, it is the principal investigator's as well as the learner's perception that a background of involvement with learners with specific learning difficulties as well as the goodness of fit between the instructor and the participant that contributed to success.

The participant himself also exhibited many characteristics that seemed to align themselves with success. His positive self-esteem gave him the self-confidence to participate actively in class and connect with the instructor for assistance when needed. Also, due to his positive view of himself, he was able to identify his strengths and build on them. Self-advocacy also played a role in his success. The participant had to advocate for his decision to join the small group class. The participant's determination was evidenced repeatedly during the study period. His determination kept him focused on his goals and therefore kept him engaged in the class. The participant had a good sense of self-awareness and was therefore able to identify his specific learning difficulties in order to focus his work on improving his weaknesses, setting clear and realistic goals to achieve success, and identifying his learning styles in order to have his learning needs met. The participant also enjoyed membership in his class and embraced learning, which contributed to his overall success.

Characteristics of the class also played a role in Brian's growth. The participant seemed to thrive in the small group environment because of the support of his classmates and the development of a social relationship with them. He also believed that the small size of the class, combined with class work, provided the best environment for his learning needs.

The participant took the first step in his self-transformation when he decided to beat his addiction to alcohol. He furthered that transformation in the class by increasing his self-confidence and becoming more outgoing and more open to others around him. This helped him access the help and support he needed. He prided himself on his transformation and was dedicated to continue his journey to becoming a better person.

Discussion

Several realizations and questions for further exploration came to light through this study. For one, although individual factors play a large role in learner success, the previous assumption that the Literacy and Basic Skills class was not meeting the needs of learners with specific learning difficulties does not seem to be the case in this study. However, it did seem that the existence of many other holistic factors increased the likelihood of success for this learner. One factor that was striking was the use of test-taking, because this type of upgrading class typically uses outcomes-based approaches. Typical assessments are comprised of activities that exhibit practical demonstrations of learning. It was

also noted that the small group model was important because of the particular classroom culture it produced.

The participant's ability to express his specific learning difficulties was also interesting. What was also surprising was his self-confidence, as this is unusual given the typical adult with a history of specific learning difficulties and past negative educational experiences. It would seem also that there is an element of good timing involved for optimal chance of success. The participant's transformation seemed to encompass all aspects of his life. One should question whether so significant a change is required to progress and meet goals in the LBS classroom.

Success in the LBS Classroom

It was assumed at the beginning of this study that the Literacy and Basic Skills classroom was not meeting the needs of learners with specific learning difficulties and that specialized, segregated instruction was needed. This assumption was based on the fact that Skinner and Gillespie (2000) and the Academy for Educational Development (1995c) recommend that a highly structured core curriculum and individualized instructional strategies be used with these learners. However, for this participant, that was not the case. The participant seemed to thrive both academically and personally in the open small group class. In the short 5-month period that he was involved in the class he was able to increase his reading, writing, and math skills as well as his understanding of his own learning style and learning needs. He also gained confidence in his

ability to learn and achieve his goals. He thrived on the social interaction of the class, even though there were no specific accommodations made for his specific learning difficulties. Instead, general learning methods, strategies, and accommodations were used with the class as a whole. This begs the question of whether all learners (in adult basic education and beyond) require or benefit from these supports. If that is the case, this would have significant implications for practice.

Holistic Factors of Success

The assumption that there are likely holistic factors that contribute to success (such as having a positive self-esteem and self-confidence and a support network) appeared to be true in this case. One such factor is the use of various teaching methods and strategies. In a study involving adult learners with specific learning difficulties and their tutors, the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Centre (2000) found that creativity along with a variety of strategies, tools, and materials were needed. Effective teaching methods include co-operative learning, using multisensory/multimodal learning, discovery learning, and using authentic documents (Skinner & Gillespie, 2000). The participant benefited from these various learning methods and strategies employed by the instructor.

There also seemed to be characteristics of the instructor that were of benefit, namely her background in working with learners with specific learning difficulties and her personality which provided a goodness of fit with the participant. Corley and Taymans (2001) suggest that, although a program

philosophy of acceptance, understanding, and respect is valued, many adult literacy instructors have only basic knowledge of specific learning difficulties and may find it difficult to meet the educational needs of these adults. Therefore, it is critical for instructors to be proactive in their own learning and seek out professional development opportunities in order to assist this population successfully (Johnson & Hegarty, 2003). The instructor not only had attended workshops around learners with specific learning difficulties but had experience tutoring adult learners with specific learning difficulties as well.

Hutchinson et al. (2004) contend that interpersonal supports are necessary to realize academic resilience and success in the classroom. It is very important for instructors to establish a positive and trusting relationship with their learners. This type of relationship existed between the participant and the instructor and contributed to his perception that he was supported and had the confidence needed to progress.

The participant himself exhibited many characteristics that seemed to contribute to meeting his goals. He had a very positive self-esteem which seemed to contribute to his confidence and motivation. This was surprising considering adults with specific learning difficulties often do not have a lot of self-confidence (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004) and feel left out, helpless, and unhappy (Emerson et al., 2005).

The participant also developed and exhibited self-advocacy skills. Sutcliffe (1990) contends that instructional tasks should offer learners the opportunity to

plan for themselves and to make choices and decisions. Brian commented that he used to handle matters of self-advocacy aggressively in the past. However, through the class, he was given activities that offered opportunities to plan for himself, make decisions, and develop communication skills to express his own point of view (Sutcliffe, 1990).

Self-determination was also a factor of success. Self-determined individuals have positive attitudes about themselves, are goal-directed, and believe that they can succeed (Corley & Taymans, 2001). Promoting self-determination in the class helps these learners to develop a range of competencies that are valued by society and that can be used to offset their specific learning difficulties (Corley & Taymans). The participant exhibited these traits and partially attributed the increase of his self-determination to the class.

The participant was also self-aware in relation to being able to identify his specific learning difficulties, set realistic goals, and identify his learning styles and needs. The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Centre (2000), in their study of learners with specific learning difficulties and their tutors, found that progress was made when both the learners and the tutors were able to articulate the learner's specific difficulties. Throughout the study, the participant was able to describe his specific learning difficulties as reading comprehension and spelling and was able to self-evaluate his progress in the class.

And finally, evidence was present that the participant transformed his beliefs about himself as a learner in a positive, empowering way. This

fundamental shift in his beliefs and values is mandatory when subscribing to transformation theory (Mezirow, 1999; Scott, 1998). These holistic factors came together to assist the participant to increase his skills and ultimately help him reach his long-term goal of full-time employment.

Test Taking

An instructional practice that was used regularly in the class was test taking and quizzing learners in both spelling and math. This is not common practice in LBS programming. Ongoing assessments usually ascribe to the learning outcomes approach and focus on demonstrations of practical learning related to the learner's goal (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2000). There was a de-emphasis on traditional types of assessments such as "tests" or "quizzes." Hence the literacy field moved to more practical, activity-based assessment practices. However, the participant valued these tests that were outside the norm. He felt that the tests motivated him to study harder and kept his mind active because of the timed component of the tests. In this way, testing added to the strategies employed as they gave the learners an opportunity to hone skills for instant response.

Small Group Versus Class

Both the small class size and the social component of the class were very important to the participant. Many adults with specific learning difficulties feel disengaged and alienated from school and feel that the traditional programs fail to meet their needs (Hutchinson et al., 2004). This, for many, has led to feelings of

isolation (Emerson et al., 2005). As a consequence, many adults with specific learning difficulties struggle to find and maintain a stable support network that provides the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional support needed for success (Hutchinson et al.). A small group in adult basic education is considered a group with between 3 and 8 participants where the class works on the same activities as a collective whole. By contrast, a class can have up to 15 learners and is based on a facilitated independent study model where the learner has specific skills that he/she is working on and gets work from the instructor to complete independently. The small group, by design, includes a social component which is likely missing from the class model; this was identified by the participant as significant in terms of his comfort with the class. It also provided him with a strong support network of peer learners who worked together and encouraged each other. This class had a group identity and solidarity which seemed to aid in the participant's comfort and skill level because of the added assistance.

Understanding the Specific Learning Difficulties

Corey and Taymans (2001) suggest that a key component in learner success is encouraging self-determination. Self-determined individuals have positive attitudes about themselves, are goal-directed, and believe that they can succeed. The first step in teaching self-determination is to know the self and value the self. This means the learner has knowledge about his/her specific learning difficulties and the ways in which these deficits affect daily life (Corey & Taymans, 2001). The participant was able to identify his specific learning

difficulties. He was able to identify that he had always had difficulty with reading comprehension and spelling. This self-awareness enabled him to pair learning strategies and accommodations to his needs (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Centre, 2000) to achieve success in the class.

Self-confidence and Appropriate Timing

Another interesting characteristic of the participant was his self-confidence. This is likely due to the special circumstance of achieving prolonged sobriety and having a comprehensive support network in the community around his addiction. However, as mentioned above, with adult literacy learners in general and specifically in learners who have specific learning difficulties, self-confidence is seldom the case (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004). The participant also mentioned during the data collection that he had attempted to change before (go back to school, get help for his alcoholism, etc.) but was never doing it for himself; this time it was for himself, and it made all the difference. Therefore, it might be the case that several life and personal factors need to come together for this individual to make upgrading successful. This same participant likely would not have had the same result from the class over a year ago because he may have still been abusing alcohol, had little self-confidence, and did not value upgrading his skills. So it may be the case that for a learner to be successful, he/she needs to be in the right life circumstances and exhibiting certain traits in order to be ready for change. This goes back to the goodness of fit

model that suggests that there needs to be a match between the learner's temperaments or traits and the learning environment (Heineman, 1995).

Transformation

It did appear that the participant experienced self-transformation. His determination to beat his addiction seemed to inspire it or act as the catalyst to other changes in his life. As Scott (1998) affirms in her relation of transformation theory, the participant seemed to shift from one set of values and beliefs (specifically addiction and self-loathing) to a more positive belief system (that he had the ability to make positive changes and set and reach his goals for the future). He constructed this change through intense support networks (Hutchinson et al., 2004) (through Alcoholics Anonymous, his classroom network, and his family) in which he used dialogue and the constant questioning of his beliefs about himself to inspire and motivate change (Scott). This transformation seemed to be all encompassing. It affected every aspect of his life: from his home life with his girlfriend and family, to his community life through his AA meetings, to the classroom. There was also an intense emotional and psychological component to his transformation. He wanted to be a better person in all aspects of his life, including how he viewed himself as a person and learner, his relationships, his skill sets, and his motivation for independence.

But is a personal transformation required for success in the LBS classroom? Is it necessary that an individual change his/her beliefs and values in order to gain skills for future goals? Or is it the existence of the prementioned

success factors (such as self-confidence, self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-awareness) that contribute to success? It could be argued that learners that have potential prerequisite success factors may already have a cohesive self and are able to make positive changes. However, for many adult literacy learners these factors are not present, due to previous negative experiences. It would therefore seem to follow that if the factors exist, it is possible to be successful without total transformation of the self. However, if these factors do not exist within the learner, success is more likely if a transformation of values and beliefs takes place inside or outside of the classroom.

Implications

The results of this study have the ability to influence future work or understanding of adult literacy learners with specific learning difficulties. This work has implications for future adult basic education practice, educational theory, and future research.

Implications for Practice

If it is the case that the above-mentioned characteristics and factors do increase the likelihood of success for learners with specific learning difficulties, there are several implications for literacy practitioners and programs. First, it is impossible for literacy instructors to teach someone to have self-confidence or self-motivation. The instructors have no control as to what personal characteristics learners hold and believe about themselves. That being said, it is possible for instructors to create a space for conversations and activities around

these topics in order to facilitate a learner's understanding of himself/herself. Beyond the curriculum, there are many functional skills that can be addressed such as self-help, time management, employment adjustment, stability skills (Young et al., 1996), and social skills (Academy for Educational Development, 1995b) among others. In this way, and through the natural development of skills in the class, it may allow the learner the opportunity to change how he/she views himself/herself as a learner and also as a person.

For example, the literacy council created an entire class around the development of skills outside of academics, such as social consciousness (discussing current events) and self-evaluation (checklists and writing activities). Direct instruction was also used to address personal topics such as respect for others and hygiene. These things can very easily be done within the context of the curriculum as well. In this way, the class can act as a facilitator of not just academic skills but of the redefinition of the self. These positive self-changes would likely result in increased participation in the class, increased motivation, as well as positive changes or interactions outside of the class with family, friends, coworkers, and the community in general.

Also, when working with learners with specific learning difficulties it may be important to discuss specific and individualized learning difficulties so that learners have an increased and intimate understanding of their learning strengths and needs (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Centre, 2000). Following that, it would likely be of benefit to describe and teach specific strategies that

may assist the learner. In this way, learners can better identify the strategies and accommodations that they require. This may also translate into skills that can be used outside of the classroom environment, such as in the workplace.

Another critical implication for practice is the value of the social component of the classroom environment. There was very strong support for both small class size and learning together in a class environment which provided a strong support network (Hutchinson et al., 2004) for the participant and aided in skill development and increased self-confidence and a sense of belonging. Although it may not be possible for all classes to adopt a small group model, components of this environment should be considered. For example, it may be possible for larger classes with learners functioning at various levels to work together on some activities and have the opportunity to develop relationships. These activities could focus on things outside of particular skill sets, such as class discussions on various community topics, sharing personal stories as a class, or creating group projects. It may also be possible to group learners according to levels and provide opportunities to work on activities as a group. The benefits of including these types of activities may extend beyond the classroom in a positive, significant way.

Implications for Theory

Transformation theory is a learning theory that specifically addresses adult educators, as they are typically placed to help learners develop autonomy and seek equality, social justice, and democracy (Mezirow, 1999). Transformation

theory suggests that transformation is a structural change that results in a fundamental shift in someone's beliefs and values (Scott, 1998). Mezirow contends that this means to avoid closure of certainty and to seek new experiences with multiple meanings. The results of this study may have an implication for this theory in the possibility that appropriate timing is necessary in order to facilitate the shift in values. Instructors can help learners develop autonomy only if they are willing and in a place to internalize such assistance. It may be the case that there needs to be an interconnection between the availability of the learning opportunity and the readiness of the learner. It may be only in this marriage of concepts that true transformation takes place.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study are likely to be of interest and use to a number of different bodies. However, because of the small scale of the research design, the results are not generalizable to all adult literacy classes. Therefore, further research in the area of adult literacy learners with specific learning difficulties should focus on larger scale, quantitative studies of the holistic factors of success for this population. In this way, these findings could be validated or modified and could speak to adult basic education programs in Ontario and beyond to inform practice.

For a large-scale quantitative study focusing on this subject matter to take place, it would also be necessary to establish a statistical tracking system of the incidence of specific learning difficulties in the adult basic education classroom.

To date, the adult basic education field has no concrete data on the incidence of specific learning difficulties in LBS classes. These data could provide a way to establish a sample for larger research designs.

Further research should also be conducted on the outcomes of specialized, separate training for this population and whether or not learners are served better in a specialized or open class. Also, the viability of incorporating the class designs, strategies, and methods that were proven to work for learners with specific learning difficulties in larger classes should be examined.

Final Word

A significant amount of attention has been paid to examining children with specific learning difficulties and the positive effects of early assessment, various interventions, and in-school supports. However, very little attention has been paid to the adult learner with the same difficulties. A significant issue is the fact that there is no subsidy for psycho-educational assessments, individualized training plans, or specific academic supports. Hence, these learners are underserved and unnoticed. It is also this population that may be struggling to complete daily tasks or maintain employment. It may also be this population that is parenting those children who do not receive the amount of school support they need at home. This is not an issue isolated from the social fabric of society. It is embedded and is affecting people's lives and the lives around them. Adults with specific learning difficulties deserve political and societal attention, not only because of the implications of how it affects a person's ability to function in

society but because all people should have the right to fulfill their own potential.

It is only through the investment in people of all ages that society can truly unlock its own potential for growth and change.

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Appendix A

Document Analysis Checklist: Initial Academic Assessment

Item	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
Specific Learning Difficulties Background Indicators Identified (i.e., persistent difficulties in reading, writing, and math; failed grades, hated school, etc.)				
Specific Learning Difficulties Identified				
Referred to an LBS Class				
LBS Levels in Reading, Writing, and Math Identified				
Academic Strategy Ideas Identified				
Other Strategy Ideas Outlined (social, emotional, psychological)				

Appendix B

Document Analysis Checklist: Training Plan

Item	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
Short/Long Term Goals Identified				
Specific Learning Difficulties Identified				
Academic Strategy Ideas Outlined				
Core Curriculum Suggested				
Training of Components of Self-Determination Suggested				
Social Skills Training Suggested				
Self-Advocacy/Self-Esteem Training Suggested				
Cooperative Learning Suggested				
Multi-Sensory/Multi-Modal Learning Suggested				
Discovery Learning Suggested				
Use of Authentic Documents Suggested				

Appendix C

Document Analysis Checklist: Learner Portfolio

Item	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
Core Curriculum Activities Collected				
Components of Self-Determination Activities Collected				
Social Skills Activities Collected				
Self-Advocacy/Self-Esteem Activities Collected				
Cooperative Learning Activities Collected				
Multi-Sensory/Multi-Modal Activities Collected				
Discovery Learning Activities Collected				
Authentic Document Activities Collected				
Documents that Reflect Personal Transformation Collected				

Appendix D

Document Analysis Checklist: 3-Month Assessment Report

Item	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
LBS Levels Identified for Reading, Writing, and Math				
Progress Comments on Academic Skills Included				
Comments on Core Curriculum Included				
Comments on Non-Academic Curriculum Included				
Comments on Short Term Goal Included				
Comments on Long Term Goal Included				
Other				

Appendix E

Instructor Questionnaire 1 (beginning of the study)

1. How long have you been in the field of education?
2. How long have you been a Literacy and Basic Skills instructor?
3. What do you enjoy the most about teaching adults?
4. Is your program learner-centred? If so, how?
5. Have you been involved in any professional development activities around specific learning difficulties?
6. Have you worked with learners with specific learning difficulties before?
Approximately how many?
7. What specific strategies or learning methods did you employ with these learners?
8. Have you used a core curriculum with these learners before? If so, was it successful?
9. SD1 - Do you believe that it is important that learners understand their specific learning difficulties? If so, how do you encourage this?
10. SD2 - How do you help these learners with goal-setting?
11. SD3 - Do you believe that it is important for learners to fit situations to their strengths? If so, how do you encourage this?
12. SD4 - How do you assist learners to self-evaluate?
13. SD5 - How do you create a supportive environment in the classroom?
14. Do you teach social skills explicitly? Please explain.

15. Do you address self-advocacy skills or self-esteem? If so, how?
16. Do you encourage cooperative learning? If so, how?
17. Do you create activities that are multi-sensory/multi-modal?
18. Discovery learning involves discussion and response where the learner takes an active role in the learning process. Have you ever used this learning strategy with a learner or in a cooperative learning environment?
19. Do you use authentic documents related to the learner's goal?

Appendix F

Instructor Questionnaire 2 (middle of the study)

1. Can you describe the progress that the learner has made thus far in the program in:
 - a. Reading
 - b. Writing
 - c. Math
 - d. Other
2. Can you describe your relationship with the learner?
3. In your opinion, how does the learner see him/herself?
4. What were the challenges that you have faced with instruction?
5. Does the learner have any barriers to learning?
6. Does the learner have supports or personal traits that assist him/her?
7. What learning methods or strategies work well for this learner?
8. Were any skills addressed that are outside of the Literacy and Basic Skills levels material? If so, what?
9. What was your approach to teaching this material?
10. Do you use direct instruction?
11. Other comments.

Appendix G

Instructor Questionnaire 3 (end of the study)

1. Can you describe the progress that the learner has made thus far in the program in:
 - a. Reading
 - b. Writing
 - c. Math
 - d. Other
2. Can you describe your relationship with the learner?
3. In your opinion, how does the learner see him/herself?
4. In the last 3 months, have you seen the learner transform his/her perceptions of him/herself in any way?
5. Have you faced any new challenges with instruction?
6. Does the learner have continued barriers to learning?
7. Does the learner have ongoing supports or personal traits that assist him/her?
8. What learning methods or strategies work well for this learner?
9. Were any skills addressed since the last interview that are outside of the Literacy and Basic Skills levels material? If so, what?
10. What was your approach to teaching this material?
11. What have you learned about working with a learner with specific learning difficulties?

12. Have you made any changes to the way you teach? If so, what?
13. Have you discussed your teaching practices with learners who have specific learning difficulties with other colleagues?
14. Do you have any plans to continue your professional development in the area of specific learning difficulties? Please explain.

Appendix H

Participant Interview 1 (beginning of the study)

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself (i.e., do you have children, what do you do for fun, etc.).
2. Why did you decide to enter an upgrading program?
3. What are your short-term goals?
4. What are your long-term goals (personal, educational, employment-related)?
5. What are your strengths in general?
6. What are your learning strengths?
7. Are you able to fit situations to your strengths? If so, how? Can you provide an example?
8. Do you have a supportive environment at home? Please explain.
9. What are your specific learning difficulties (reading, writing, math)?
10. Do you have any difficulties with social skills? Please explain.
11. Are you able to advocate or stand up for yourself? If so, can you give me an example?
12. Do you have a positive self-esteem? Explain.
13. How do you think the class will help you reach your goals?
14. Are there any specific ways that you need to learn?
15. How would you describe yourself as a learner?
16. Are there any barriers that are hindering you? (in/outside of class)?

Appendix I

Participant Interview 2 (middle of the study)

1. Are your goals still the same? If not, what are they now and why have you changed them?
2. Please describe your relationship with your instructor.
3. Please describe your relationship with your other classmates.
4. What have you learned so far in the class in:
 - a. Reading
 - b. Writing
 - c. Math
 - d. Other
5. What are the most valuable things that you are learning?
6. What are things that help you learn?
7. Are there things that make it difficult to learn?
8. What are your strengths in general?
9. What are your learning strengths?
10. Can you describe your specific learning difficulties?
11. What strategies are you using to help you with your difficulties? Do they work?
12. Are there things that you would like to learn but haven't covered?

Appendix J

Participant Interview 3 (end of the study)

1. Are your goals still the same? If not, what are they now and why have you changed them?
2. Please describe your relationship with your instructor.
3. Please describe your relationship with your other classmates.
4. What have you learned so far in the class in:
 - a. Reading
 - b. Writing
 - c. Math
 - d. Other
5. What are the most valuable things that you are learning?
6. What are things that help you learn?
7. Are there things that make it difficult to learn?
8. What are your strengths in general?
9. What are your learning strengths?
10. Can you describe your specific learning difficulties?
11. What strategies are you using to help you with your difficulties? Do they work?
12. Are there things that you would like to learn but haven't covered?
13. Do you intend to stay in the class?

14. Do you see yourself differently after having been in the class? If so, in what ways?

Appendix K**Observation Checklist**

Time	Learner Behaviour	Participant/ Instructor Interaction	Class Interaction	Content	Learning Methods

Appendix L

Clearance Letter



**Brock
University**

Office of Research Services
Research Ethics Office

St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1

T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

www.brocku.ca

DATE: April 23, 2007

FROM: Julie Stevens, Vice Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Joe Engemann, Education
Sara GILL

FILE: 06-258 GILL

TITLE: Creating a Space for Transformation: Factors of Success for Adult Literacy Learners with Auditory Processing Disorders or Suspected Auditory Processing Disorders

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as clarified.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of April 23, 2007 to June 29, 2007 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form **Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application**.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

JS/bb